スレイヤーズ

13 降魔への道標

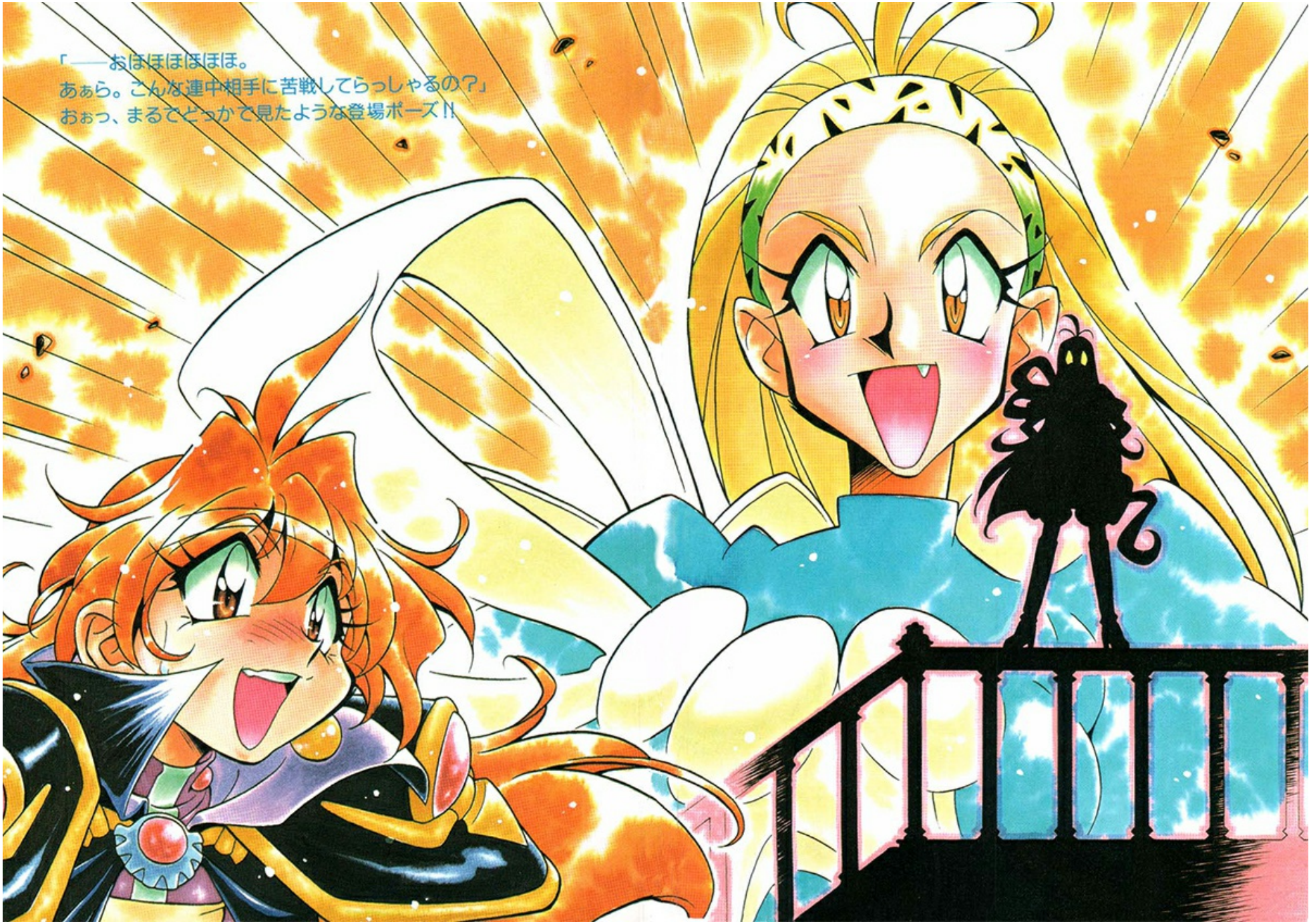
神坂一

HAJIME KANZAKA

ファンタジア文庫

スレイヤーズ13

降魔への道標


「――おほほほほほ。
あぁら。こんな連中相手に苦戦してらっしゃるの？」
おぉっ、まるでどっかで見たような登場ポーズ!!

「おおおおおおおおおっ！」
メンフィスが放った光の軌跡を追って
ガウリイが駆け抜ける！

SLAYERS

VOL.13: THE PATH TO THE DEMON'S FALL

Written by Hajime Kanzaka
Illustrated by Rui Araizumi
Translated by Raugnut Rushavna
ceiphiedknightandbanditsplight.wordpress.com

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Though They are Moving, the Mazoku's Objective Remains Unseen

"Once, there was a battle, where gods and monsters and all living things were involved in the struggle. It traced back to a distant legend: Betting on the safety of the entire world, a God and a Dark Lord fought. The God had run out of power and left four pieces of himself behind. The Dark Lord then left five servants. He now rests in seven pieces, sealed away.

When the first piece of the Dark Lord was reborn, we were there, and with one piece of our God we challenged them to battle. People called it the Kouma War." This was told by Milgazia, an elder of the Dragon race. And this, is the revival of the Kouma war.

* * *

Just then, the rain started to pour, gaining force. Up until a moment ago, the ground had been dry, but now many puddles had formed. Villagers rushed to their homes, complaining as the water splashed up around them. In the corner of this small village, the door to a small restaurant opened with a creak.

"Waaaahhh. That was so sudden."

I headed for a table inside, raindrops falling from my cape as it flapped. The elf Memphy had said that the rain was coming, so for the time being we sought out a place where we could settle down and talk. That's how we came to this village. Just as she had said, it suddenly started raining, and we basically had the choice of either

entering the village, or not entering the village.

It was too late for lunch, and too early for dinner, so when we came in there weren't any customers but the six of us. Of course, that made things convenient for us. Taking on a human form, Mr. Milgazia wore leather armor over his clothes, which was much better than the weird armor Memphy was wearing. There's no doubt we'd stand out. And if there were other customers here, there's no way we could get away with talking about things like Mazoku and the Kouma war. We all gathered around a table at the center of the shop. A waitress came to take the order of the four of us– Me and Gourry, Luke and Milina. And in between every little order she would prompt with "…and for you two?" Memphy and Milgazia stared at the menu and said in unison

"Shredded cabbage."

"Just water."

"…You guys… are horrible customers." I cut in without sparing any time. The waitress, also looking a little disappointed, sunk away into the shop.

"Don't mistake me for some human. I won't partake in such savagery as killing other living things for food." Hearing what she said, Luke's face turned blue.

"If you have an unbalanced diet, your father will worry about you."

"Ah! Mr. Milgazia, don't you call me out on this!" When Mr. Milgazia pointed it out, she protested at a whisper.

…She really is an elf. Defending her preferences with ideological backing, but it still falls apart in the end…

"You say that, but didn't you just order water?"

"As a member of the Dragon Race, after a certain age, I no longer require nourishment. I survive by absorbing the feelings of heaven and earth and that becomes my food." Mr. Milgazia answered Luke's question.

"Dragon? Wait, you're what?!"

Oh, right. I hadn't told Luke or Milina about that yet.

"I guess we still need to introduce ourselves. Well then, let's start things off easy by everyone giving a personal introduction, okay?" Luke, Milina, Gourry and I introduced ourselves as our turns came around. The waitress then came carrying our orders.

"I am Milgazia. I come from Dragon's peak, overlooking the Kataart mountains. There, it is my duty to manage everything that goes on. I sense what you are thinking, I use transformative magic to temporarily hold this form."

"…I see…." After what Mr. Milgazia had said, Luke gave a little nod, then briefly glanced at Gourry. "So that's what 'Big lizard with too much free time' means."

"I may be repeating myself, but can you stop calling me a big lizard?"

"Uwah! My bad! My bad!"

Before you knew it, Mr. Milgazia had drawn himself very close

to Luke, who retracted his slip-of-the-tongue.

“So…” completely ignoring the issue, Milina prompted the last person, Memphy, with a glance.

“Memphis. Memphis Linesword.”

…….

For a short while, silence hung in the air.

“….And?” I blurted out an invitation. But without even looking at me, she just said straightly “and what?”

...Bitch.

“Uh, well… maybe you could tell us a little about yourself.”

“You can tell by looking that I’m an elf. Do you need any more explanation than that?”

What a bitch!

“No, but… Look, Memphy, I thought we could share a little bit about ourselves for the sake of smoothing out our relationship. That’s the idea, isn’t it? Maybe you could say something like ‘My favorite pastime is wearing freaky-looking armor’ or ‘I indulge myself by eating nothing but cabbage’” I said with a big grin on my face. Her face turned blue.

“It’s Memphis, not Memphy! I will not have some human calling me by something so overly-familiar! On that note, we’ve smoothed out our relationship quite a bit now.”

“Have we now? Heheheheh.”

“Even on moonless nights, we elves can function in the dark. Aren’t you curious about the kind of things I know?”

“Come on. Stop that, Memphy.”

“But Mr. Milgazia…”

Ignoring Memphis’ look of disappointment, Mr. Milgazia sighed and continued. “For a long time I have been close with this girl’s family. And now, the elves have sensed strange happenings and have begun investigating here and there. This girl is my partner in the investigation, which is why she’s here with me.” From Milgazia’s nonchalant explanation, an unnecessary shadow spread over my heart.

“So that means… the elves are of the same opinion? That this chain of disturbances is related to the revival of the Kouma war?”

“…” At my question, Mr. Milgazia was silent for a while. And then he nodded.

And that’s how the tale started. The events of 1000 years ago.

* * *

The world was covered with an air of unrest. For several kingdoms, war preparations and the unseen arms build-up proceeded. Again and again there were repeated skirmish’s at the

borders. And then those little skirmishes turned into all out war. But it was just a little thing, at least it wasn't necessary for us to take action. Several kingdoms were dragged into the fighting that came about, and for a while nobody realized what was going on.

This was in the days when people still coexisted with elves. Amidst the fighting and madness, the Mazoku began to cause more suffering– gradually increasing the amount. By the time anyone realized it, it was too late. All of the countries were already facing ruin. Many of those who had been called heroes, were killed fighting in foreign lands– by other humans.

Large numbers of demon hordes started appearing out in the fields, and they would overrun those who survived the war. Countless lives had been lost. The dragons, as they watched the war on mankind, took onlooking for granted. At long last, we sensed the presence of something laying dormant in the background. If you think about it, even with all the kingdoms increasing their military power, it felt like whoever had the will to infiltrate to a kingdom could do so. Dragons, Elves, Dwarves, or even Humans. If all living things united, their combined power could wipe out the overflow of demons from the plains. But the demon hordes that appeared couldn't even be shaken. While everyone was focusing on the fields, the five retainers of the Dark Lord gathered. At the time AquaLord Ragradia was residing on holy ground in the Kataart mountains. In a direct showdown, the retainers used their skills to ward off Aqualord, destroy the shrine, and killed the saint.

Gradually they transformed the Kataarts into mountains of death. The Mazoku's aim was Aqualord. Sensing that, those who had allied

themselves with the dragons headed to the Kataart mountains to lend their strength to Aqualord. And then, the Dark Lord appeared.

* * *

"Huh?" I blurted out like an idiot in the middle of Mr. Milgazia's tale. "A-Appeared…? From where?"

"No idea."

Hey now.

At his flat answer, my eyes went small.

"No one knows what happened. Of those who happened to be present in the place he appeared, there wasn't a single survivor. He must have been firmly concealing his presence and somehow the seal was broken. But anyhow, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu's presence suddenly appeared in the Kataart mountains. We couldn't win. Though Hellmaster Phibrizzo's priest was destroyed, much of the dragon race was annihilated by the priest Xellos. Because of that, even an elite force of Humans, Dwarves and Elves working together wouldn't be able to separate him. We somehow managed to put up a fight, but that said, under those circumstances, Shabranigdu would be reborn. Victory was already impossible. After that… it's just as the legends say. Chaos Dragon Gaav was defeated, Hellmaster's priest and Aqualord were destroyed, and the resurrected Shabranigdo was sealed in the ice of Aqualord. That's how the battle was fought. But again, there were no surviving witnesses. Only the Gods and Dark Lords know."

All of us were already speechless. Excluding me and Gourry,

everyone was so involved in the story that they hadn't even touched their food.

"I had heard that the Kingdom of Dils was building up their military strength. And then most recently I heard about the appearance of demon hordes. Now that Hellmaster Phibrizzo has been destroyed, the Mazoku's fighting power is down. That's their first reason. That is, a counterattack against the Revival of the Kouma war. On that, the dragons and the elves are of the same opinion."

"And the Dwarves' opinion?" Milina asked from the side. It's a legitimate question. Mr. Milgazia mentioned them in his story, and they certainly fought in the Kouma war.

At that question, he answered with a troubled face, "We haven't been able to get in contact with them, not since the Kouma war. Up until now the dwarf population has been in decline. They didn't want to get dragged into battle, and to be honest, even if we did have them participate in the fighting, they wouldn't provide much force. I said that the dragons and elves were of the same opinion, but that's not the complete truth… That's what we were led to think. That said, we did think it through thoroughly. Consequently we, dragons and elves included, are now scattered far and wide for the sake of investigation. We sensed a great evil presence coming from Dils, so we came to investigate.

"And that's where you met us?"

Mr. Milagazia gave a small nod. And then, as if he had just recalled something, "That's right, around two years ago we also felt

a strong evil presence…”

Memphis nodded at that. “Yes. We felt it as well. From it’s presence, the enemy must have been a considerably high ranked Mazoku. It grew violent but… before we could act, a day– not even that, had passed and the presence suddenly disappeared. What in the world was that?” She shook her head side to side and brought her cup to her lips.

“Hey Lina.” Interrupting the story, Gourry looked to me with a question. I was wondering what kind of stupid thing he was going to ask because he wasn’t paying attention but…

“About two years ago… isn’t that around the time we defeated the dark lord Shabra-whatever?”

“Eep!”

At Gourry’s words, Milgazia, Memphis, Luke and Milina all blurted out.

“Y-Yooouuuuuu! Don’t say things like that so casually!!!”

cough cough hack

“W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-”

Mr. Milgazia went into a coughing fit and next to him, Memphis fired off a bunch of w’s in rapid succession.

“H-Hey, there’s no way you mean…?! Ruby Eye Shabranigdu?! You shitting me?!”

“But… I don’t think he’s the type of person to lie…” Next to a completely baffled Luke, Milina pretended to keep her cool, with

sweat collecting on her forehead. “W-Well… at least, I don’t think he’s intelligent enough to lie… But, how on earth did you defeat him?”

“Uhhh… well…” I threw a fleeting glance at Memphis and Mr. Milgazia who were paying close attention to me. While scratching my head, I said “The sword of light… that is, the Dark Star weapon Goln Nova, with a maybe a tiny bit of the imperfect Lord of Nightmares spell as an extra. Teehee <3!”

At those words, Memphis and Mr. Milgazia were completely and utterly petrified. But of course they were, since they should know about Dark Star and the Lord of Nightmares. But the other two… Not knowing what was going on around them, Luke and Milina just knit their brows.

“I have no idea what’s going on but…. Did you do something awesome?”

“Don’t just say ‘awesome’ so easily!!!” Memphis screeched at the words Luke let slip. “And you! What the hell?! Do you understand what you did?! If you lost control of that it could’ve meant the end of the world!” Her voice completely changes when she gets excited like this.

“Well, no… at the time I really had no idea what I was doing…”

“You used an unknown spell without even knowing the consequences of using it?!! Only a human would…!”

“Yeah, well, that story’s way over anyway.”

“You aren’t even going to contemplate what you did?!”

At my all-in-the-past attitude, Memphis became even more excited. To the side, Mr. Milgazia continued being petrified. Hm… I guess in this situation, I better not say something like 'When I defeated Hellmaster, my body was being controlled by the Lord of Nightmares <3'

"But our current problem isn't connected to that." Milina's words were like cold water being poured on the overheated Memphis. "It's important that we know what to do from here on out."

"C-Certainly. A-Anyway, Memphy, you can criticize her anytime. For now, more than that…"

"U-Understood… Mr. Milgazia."

Mr. Milgazia had finally regained consciousness, but with his voice still quivering. Memphis grudgingly nodded at him.

Mr. Milgazia took a look around at everyone. "You say you all defeated General Sherra. However, if we anticipate that the Mazoku's objective is a revival of the Kouma war— that probably won't stop their plans. If you could… I would like you humans to lend a hand.

* * *

The night air trembled with only the sound of falling rain. There was only one inn in the village, so I don't know if the bar on the first floor just wasn't prosperous or if it was the rain's fault. It was still early evening, meaning there was a lull in people and the noise had disappeared. Even so, around dinner, it felt like other than us, there

were almost no other customers.

Phew. I hung my cape up on a clotheshook, took a deep breath, plopped down on the bed and turned over onto my side.

What the hell… it feels like I've stuck my neck into another huge problem. I stared hazily at the lamp hanging from the ceiling and heaved a small sigh within my chest. At the end of the day, we agreed to lend a hand in Mr. Milgazia's investigation without making any excuses.

Luke was grumbling about something like "No thanks, you're just putting us to work." but then Mr.Milgazia told him "If a revival of the Kouma war, or something like it is executed, then the Dark Lord will be reborn. If that happens, life will be far from golden. All living things may very well disappear. Even you. Even your partner." With this persuasion, and sensing Milina's gaze, he swung his neck up and down in agreement. That said, it isn't entirely 'just work.' If we cooperate, the weapons developed by the dragons and the elves will be divided among us. And that's how the story goes. Of course Memphis was making this sour face, so Mr.Milgazia told her "This is so we can boost our overall fighting power." In the end, she couldn't say anything. So now, the weapons developed by the dragons and elves will be officially ours!

Come to think of it, those weapons are probably quite valuable. After all, in relation to humans, the knowledge and magical ability of the Dragons and Elves is completely unattainable. Combining their power, they could probably make something that could match them equally against the Mazoku! Out there, there are probably all sorts of Magic swords and Cursed blades, and other things that should be

impossible to find, just lying at your feet! If I could get my hands on them, once this case is closed, I could thoroughly research them. And if they have no use, I can sell them for a high price!

"…"

That means I'll have to wait for this case to be closed. But that's the biggest problem.… There's no doubt we'll be facing a terrible enemy. This won't be some small fry Mazoku. Any way you look at it, this is the kind of scheme where a big-shot Dynast General is running around as someone's gofer. So then the enemy who is really leading this scheme is probably— One of the five retainers of the Dark Lord: Dynast Grausherra. No, in the worst case scenario, we would be surrounded by Mazoku, with the entire race as our enemy. And I think there's a possibility of that happening. So our only salvation is not to defeat them, but to continue investigating to the bitter end.

In proceeding with the investigation, there's no possibility of us having to go up against them. And yeah… thinking this way is a little reckless. But it's just like Mr. Milgazia says, the day the Dark Lord is reborn, there won't be much to joke about. Previously when we fought the Dark Lord, there were a few different factors piling up in our favor and we somehow defeated him, but next time shouldn't work out so well. That considered, we must somehow prevent that situation from happening. But I can't just forget how easy it would be to say "I know nothing. Well, Good luck, Mr.Milgazia! <3"

I don't have to do this. I don't want to do this. I don't know how many times that thought had rolled around in my mind—

…..?

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of water trickling down. It wasn't the same sound as the still pouring rain. The sound of water hitting the floor opposite the window— I could hear it from the hallway. It seemed like a roof leak. That's not right. There's no reason a roof leak would sound like it was slowly coming down the hallway. A strange premonition ran down my back.

I put my cape on again, took my short sword in one hand, and silently headed toward the door. I gently focused my ears. I couldn't hear anything that sounded like footsteps, but the sound of trickling water was definitely closer. If by any chance there was something out there, it might not have anything to do with me. But conversely, there's a probability that it does. And if it does, all I can do about it is try and make sure.

Drip… Drip… I concentrated my awareness on the falling water. Following the rhythm–

Bam!

I threw open the door of my hotel room, and sprung out into the hallway.

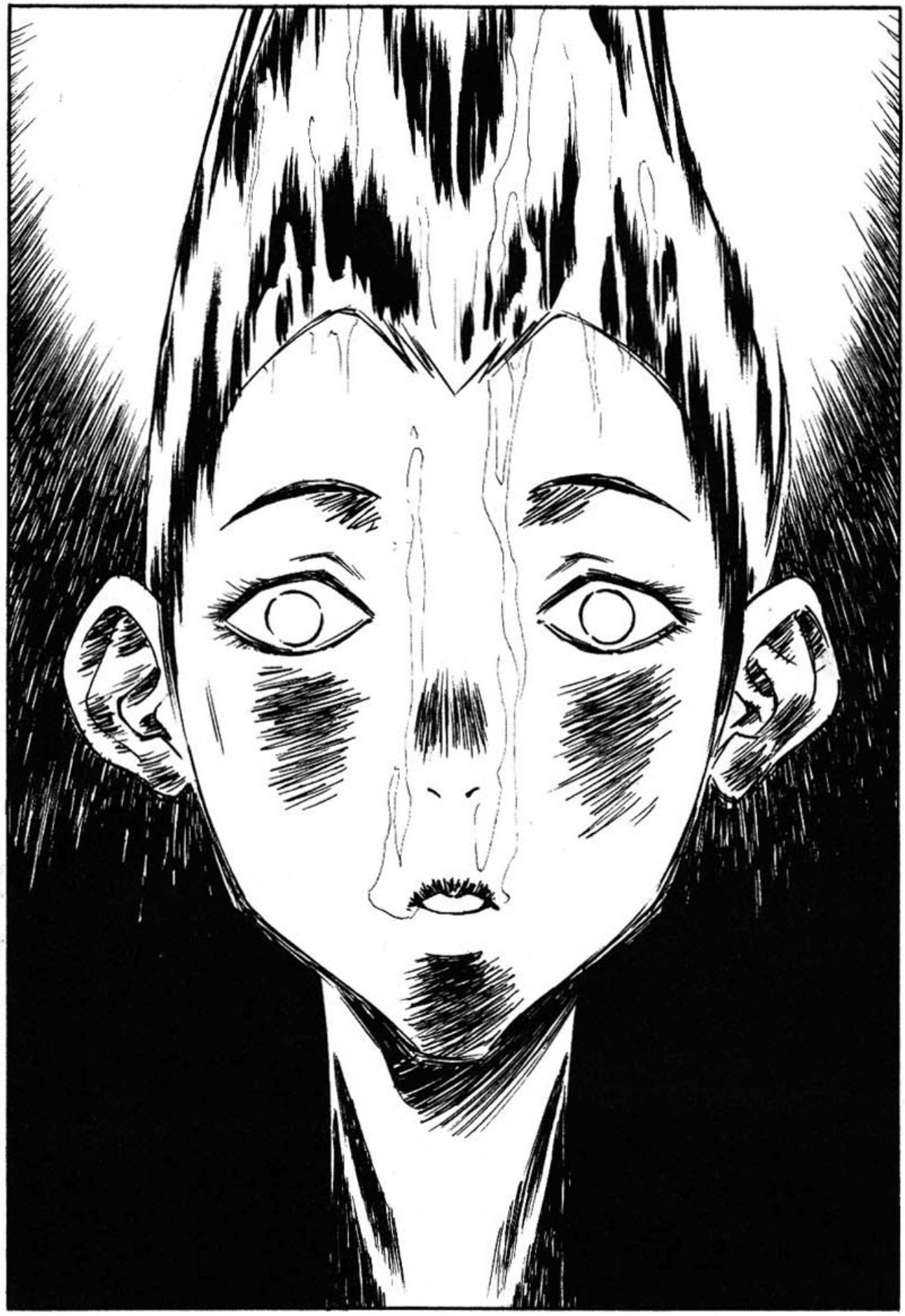
…drip… A drop of water hit the floor.

Illuminated by dim orange lamps, looking down the hall I couldn't see a definite figure, but…

…?!

Something moved in my field of vision. In the shadows cast by the lamp– The ceiling?! When I turned my gaze upward–

“Ughehehe?!” I automatically stepped back while trying to muffle my outcry. Slightly dirty with soot from the lamp, and partially concealed by the darkness, a girl’s head was hanging upside down from the ceiling.



Her long Black hair swayed a little. She had a handsome face, with cloudy, glazed-over eyes. From her partially opened lips, which had lost their color, water dripped out, flowed down her hair, and splashed on the floor of the hall.

…drip…

Beneath her neck were innumerable… This is awkward. Are they roots or veins? She groaned, swaying to and fro while clinging to the ceiling. Of course like this it probably wasn't completely alive or completely dead. That was my first thought. That is… it was a Mazoku.

"… are you lina • inverse?"

She looked down at me from high in the darkness and spoke with a muffled voice, as if she was submerged in water.

?!

The moment I heard her say it, I instantly started reciting a spell. Of course, none of my "friends" were here. Nevertheless, this Mazoku knows my name, which means: it can be nothing but an enemy.

Before I could complete my spell, her bloodlust swelled up. I instantly jumped to the side. Just then, from her mouth spewed a great torrent of water that crashed into the space where I had just been. Damn! That's a dirty trick for something with an appearance like that! I knit my brows. Suddenly, the sound of something falling reached my ears. I turned a fleeting glance in that direction. The door that I had left open when I came out had been completely cut apart

diagonally, the top half tumbling to the floor.

I get it, that torrent of water just now is just as sharp as a sword. But there are lots of ways around that! This one should be no problem to kill in a single blow!

"Zelas Brid!" A ball of light came forth and headed in a straight line towards the hanging face. Instantly, a number of roots detached themselves from the ceiling and entwined themselves around it. But something so gentle isn't enough to stop a technique that borrows power from Greater Beast!

The light easily blew through the root that wrapped itself around it and made a direct hit with the head. The girl's head burst open and water sprayed all over the place. The roots clinging to the ceiling convulsed—and pop! From the end of a root, a new head sprouted.

Whoa, Whoa! What the hell is *that*?!! Staring straight at me as I panicked, it opened its mouth wide and—

With a streak of silver light, the girl's head was blown off again and water doused the area.

"Gourry!"

"She's cute. Friend of yours, Lina?"

I don't know when he got here. He stood silently with the unnamed magic sword in one hand, giving off the appearance of a golden haired warrior… wearing his breast plate over his pajamas. If he didn't look so stupid, he probably would've looked pretty cool…

"She's not my friend. Although she seems to know me. Watch out for the water vomit, okay?"

“Roger….er…”

“Ugh!”

As Gourry and I were cracking jokes, we both groaned in unison. Again, another upside down girl’s head had sprouted. Scratch that. Five heads sprouted at the same time. Even knowing that this is a Mazoku, an inhumane creature, a cluster of girls heads hanging upside spewing water out of their mouths, and staring with those dull, cloudy eyes, was just too much.

“What the… Is this supposed to be its final form? Hey!”

“That’s a lot of service, eh? Well, obviously its head isn’t its weak point.” I said as I began chanting a spell. At the same time Gourry charged toward the Mazoku. From it’s mouth it sprayed several streams of water that crashed into the floor and wall. We frantically twisted our bodies to avoid it, me while casting a spell and Gourry while…

“Hah!”

He slashed the stream apart, dodged it, and closed in on the Mazoku. With one strike he sliced all of the heads. And then by stealing the offensive advantage–

“Lina!” With a great jump back, he signaled for me. Nice, Gourry! I was done reciting my spell. And so I—

“Blast Ash!” I released the spell behind me. It produced a black cloud and within it, I brought on a fate of ruin. At least I should have. But…

The darkness that spread out converged at a single point and

disappeared. —in the palm of a new Mazoku's hand. He was the same proportion as a human, a man, but in the ideal spot for a head there was something that resembled a wriggling horn, but more like a group of them had formed together. I had felt his presence, and pretending to hit the root-head Mazoku with my spell, I turned and hit him with a surprise attack. But he was still able to avoid it. He didn't seem like an easygoing opponent.

"What are you doing messing around, Mianzo? Hurry and carry out your orders." The twisty horned Mazoku said as if I hadn't just attacked him. With only a horn for a head, I don't know where his voice was coming from. Well I guess, our opponent is a Mazoku. They aren't limited to talking with mouths.

"Maybe… we could go a little flashier… Tselzonaag…" The root head– or rather, the root Mazoku that had lost its head– Mianzo agreed with him.

Whoa, hold on a second! If a Mazoku says its gonna go a little flashier, I get the feeling they aren't just joking! But Gourry and I didn't have time to respond. There was a flash of light and then the entire inn was blown away.

* * *

"U…dudududududuuudu…."

With the sound of scattering debris as I pushed aside pieces of wood and stone, my face emerged above ground. And I was immediately pelted with rain.

Where are those bastards?!

Mianzo had changed its appearance so that it was now similar to ivy growing along the ground. Of course, the half with the girl's head was still hanging upside down. They weren't …looking…(?) in my direction. The enemy they were confronting…

"Why… is there a dragon in a place like this?!" Tselzonaag said, his voice oozing with obvious distress.

"I won't explain that." Mr. Milgazia said with arrogance. "The evil plot of the Mazoku, did you think we would overlook it?"

"If that's so… I'll be taking this seriously as well." Mianzo mumbled in its muffled voice that time. With a sound like the buzz of insects, Mianzo's body blurred away in an instant.

At the same time, a number of small lights flashed in the area around Mr. Milgazia. An attack that spans across the sky– No, a direct attack from the Astral Plane. If he gets hit from the Astral plane, even if he is a dragon…!

"Useless!"

And then all of my fears were blown away. With one hand, he shook them off. That's right. He just put out one hand. There was no reason for anything to change. That's all he–

"Wh…What the?" Mianzo staggered a little and let out a groan of shock.

This is–! Leaving me, a spectator, behind, was this a battle on the Astral Plane!? He understands that by building up to this level, that it would be impossible for humans, which is why he's only risking his own life in a battle to the death. Even so, for knowing it would

be impossible, looking at it now, there doesn't seem to be much going on.

"What kind of Dragon are you, so easily brushing aside my–!"

"We are beings who are not always the same. Living things, unlike yourself, can receive transformation, and possess advanced power. If you show your power, I can certainly work out something to resist it. That's all it is."

"I see… if so…" said Tselzonaag, as the horn in place of his head creaked and squeaked.

An earsplitting sound swelled up and he stretched himself toward Mr. Milgazia. And then, Mianzo's body blurred again. A dual attack from the physical and Astral Planes?! But the Mazoku had forgotten something. Their opponent wasn't Mr. Milgazia alone. Well then!

"Gaah!?"

A white light cleaved the darkness of night, and Tselzonaag's outstretched horn was completely fried.

"Wh-What?!"

What had surrounded his head previously, was the form of the strangely designed white armor clad, Memphis.

"This is absurd! An elf too?! That kind of thing should–" In response to Tselzonaag's shock, Memphis lowered her left hand which had been raised, and with her right hand she detached the part of her armor that hung by her left hip. Watching her do this, it resembled a warped white sword— it wasn't something I couldn't

see.

“Dis Shield! Mana Conversion!”

The way she’s positioning her lower body is–

“Zanaffar Sleid!” In the style of drawing a sword, cutting down the opponent and sheathing it, she cleaved the sky. And then right in that moment, it didn’t even leave–

“–Gahh?!” Tselzonaag’s scream rang out. A shockwave of light crossed the air, and struck within Tselzonaag’s own body, and exited out his back.

“G–!”

Breaking down right before my eyes, Tselzonaag was smashed into ashes, and Mianzo groaned at the realization that he was at a disadvantage. Then–

“Chaotic Disintegrate.” Mr. Milgazia released a spell that sent a torrent of light closing in!

“…. !” Leaving behind only a voiceless scream, Mianzo’s body disappeared in the light. And once the light had faded– nothing remained.

“S…Strong….”

Little by little, I started to hear voices coming in from behind me. I turned around, and I don’t know when the hell they got there, but Gourry, Luke, and Milina were all lined up standing still. Just now, somehow or other, Luke had managed to let a few words slip out.

“…H-Hey! You guys! Don’t just stand around distracted and not

help!”

“You look like you’re just standing around distracted.”

“…ugh!”

I retorted flatly at Luke’s criticism.

“W-well, no… y’see… In this situation I couldn’t do much with all the bang-banging going on….”

“Same here.” said Gourry.

“But it’s all the same right? Two Mazoku were defeated.”

“No. Just one.” Milina’s words of admiration were corrected by none other than Mr. Milgazia. “The root-like one was able to get away just before. I was able to wound her a little.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Milgazia. If she comes again, it will be no problem to defeat her.” Memphis had returned her sword– or whatever it was– to her side and came striding toward us.

“But what on earth were they here for…?”

“We’ll get a detailed account later. Right now, our first priority is removing ourselves from this place.” After interrupting her, Memphis turned a scornful look at me.

“Hmmm? Are we afraid of the Mazoku retaliating?”

“Someone talking in their sleep? Staying here is going to turn into a big problem for us. Know who says that? Me. You didn’t forget we’re in the middle of a village, did you?”

“…uh.” Everyone’s groans resounded with impressive harmony.

* * *

"Phew… I think we've gone far enough that no one will be able to follow us." Breathing a perfectly villainous line, I stopped in my tracks, now in the forest outside the village. Somehow we managed to find a place free of rain and dew. Then again, the passing showers were pretty weak.

"But… isn't it bad to just run away? In fact I get the feeling it's kind of suspicious… We did write our names in the hotel's guest register…"

"There's no need to worry about that." Memphis said carelessly to Gourry while straightening her wet hair. "I didn't write my real name in the register."

Wait, what? I swear, this girl…

"However, getting them involved in all that certainly wasn't a good idea." said Milina. "No matter how many inns you try to claim that the Mazoku destroyed, without any proof, the officials don't have to believe you. Even if by some chance their was a witness, you wouldn't be able to rely on them. And in this situation where Mr. Milgazia, of the Dragon Race, and Ms. Memphis of the Elves, are involved… If the official was prejudiced, I'm afraid he might decide that they destroyed the inn."

Right. In reality, during the battle with the Mazoku, it was the aftermath of Memphis' and Mr. Milgazia's attacks that demolished the walls of the surrounding houses.

"Well, it's certainly as Milina says. And we shouldn't waste time

complaining about what the Mazoku are guilty of." Luke, Milina's unconditional Yes-man, kept nodding his head.

"Just one thing. It seems there's been a mistake." And then without once changing his expression, Mr. Milgazia continued, "The one who demolished the inn wasn't the Mazoku. It was Memphy."

……

Everyone went silent. For the time being… I'll hear them out.

"Um…you're joking…. right? …about that?"

"No. I'm not joking at all. Can't you tell by looking at my face?"

No, I can't. Because whenever you tell some joke I can't follow, you have the same serious face, old man.

Wait……

"Whaaaaaaaaaauuut?!?! Then, that was…?!"

"We sensed that you two were fighting against Mazoku, so we provided cover. Things turned out that way because the building wasn't constructed as well as I thought. But since no one at the inn died, it shouldn't be a problem." Memphis said without a shard of remorse.

…but you're the only one who didn't use their real name in the guest register… What an unreasonably evil nature this girl has…

"Well, that's not worth worrying about. The real problem is why those Mazoku attacked you, isn't it?"

If the Innkeeper were in earshot, there's no mistake that after

uttering a backstabbing line like that, Memphis would've changed the subject. Well right now, even if we did continue the finger-pointing about who destroyed the inn, it certainly wouldn't mean anything.

"Certainly. Their goal has been bothering me." Uwah. Mr. Milgazia agrees. Hm. Dragon and Elven buildings… Is the standard of value for their living spaces any different from humans? Even so…

"Still, I don't think it'll be any good to ignore the destroyed inn."

Gourry's nonchalant way of phrasing it made Memphis and Mr. Milgazia instantly turn stiff.

"W-Well… they say things with a form will sometimes break."

"Um, yes. If you look at the big picture, I believe our top priority right now is to gain an understanding of our present condition and make a prediction about our situation."

...way to escape from reality, you two…

"Well, we can talk about the destruction of the inn and the problems with your consciences later." At Milina's suggestion the two of them twitched again. Without being concerned by that, she continued, "Before we were discussing why they were attacked, right? Even now the Mazoku could be coming for a repeated attack, that is, it's more than likely. It would be best if we figured out their motive for attacking, so it will be easier to deal with."

"I have a clue. Er, I don't know how I should say this but… Ms.

Enemy at least knows my name and face."

At that, Gourry scratched his cheek. "So… revenge? Before, we beat Sherra so now wouldn't they want to defeat the awful humans who did it? Y'know, us? So with that, the enemy…"

Again, he doesn't know anything…. This guy…

"That's probably not how it is. If it was revenge, I don't think they would have waited so long."

"Right, right. And first of all, if it was retaliation, there's no reason to send only two weak Mazoku. After all, she was the a General of Dynast. If they were seriously plotting revenge, they would have sent more forces than that." I nodded at what Mr. Milgazia had said.

"So then why did they attack?"

"Well… it's because we don't understand that is why we're worried. Ah, now that you mention it, the one that came in later– the one Memphis defeated– he said something like "we need to carry out orders quickly."

"So, they're just planning on killing you quickly?" I shook my head side to side at Luke's question.

"No matter how you look at it… It felt like they weren't just doing something unnecessary."

"They could have a different objective, but couldn't they have just heard your name by chance from some other Mazoku?" questioned Milina.

“I don’t think… there’s *no* chance of that. It could be that they were an unknown enemy in the Gyria City incident. They could have been searching but never encountered us. Which is why they would know my name and face. The possibility’s there.”

“They were going after you, but ran away in fear from us, meaning that’s *highly* likely, I think.” The emphasis Memphis put over ‘highly’ made it sound like she was bragging. “They weren’t going to take fighting with humans seriously, even though they had companions hiding elsewhere. They ran into an unexpected battle– and surprised by Mr. Milgazia and I, they ran off with their tails between their legs. Doesn’t sound like an impossible story, don’t you think?”

Certainly it isn’t an impossible story. It isn’t but… the way she says it really irritates me. Well, anyway…

“Th-That said… well, if Mazoku are coming after me again, it’s more than a little dangerous, right?”

“I guess that’s so. But if you yourself are thinking that, I don’t think the Mazoku hold you in too high regard.” Memphis said as she brushed back her hair.

wh… God, what a bitch.

“*Right*….Well, without many clues, looks like there’s not much we can do about this matter.” I said, pulling on my cheek and speaking in the friendliest tone I could. “Well, looks like we covered what you two wanted to talk about. Now, shall we go back to discussing what evil being destroyed the inn?”

“H-Hold on! Why do you have to say it like that?!”

“It’s only natural. We all properly wrote our names in the guest register and if we get treated like criminals it won’t be funny at all. But here we have this Elven sicko we can hand over and say ‘here’s the real offender’ and said Elf can atone for their sins. I think that’s the best solution, don’t you?” At my little comment Memphis instantly recoiled and scowled at me.

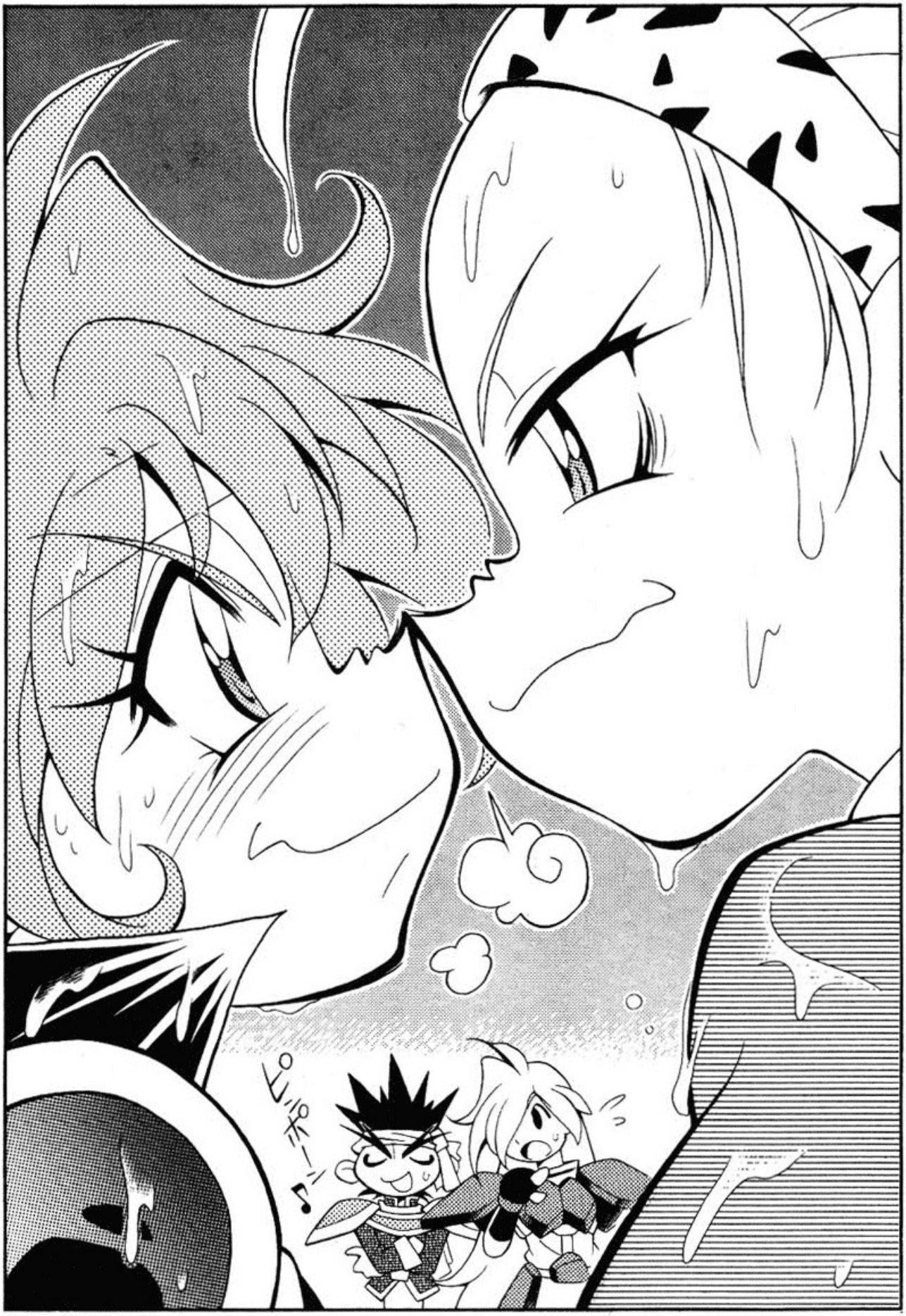
“I believe those who lack the prudence not to pick fights with Mazoku inside the inn should take responsibility, right?”

“Oho~ So no matter how you look at it, it’s between me and you. Don’t you think your view is a bit skewed?”

“No matter how you look at it, that’s how it is. Well I’m relieved not to have the same opinion as someone with such shallow thoughts…”

“So you say… heheheh….”

“It seems we need to have a nice loooong talk about this… ufufufu…”


ピーポー♪

Memphis and I stood face to face, sparks igniting through our stares. Although, I lost to her in height, which was a slight disadvantage.

“Hey…. Do you think…” Watching us glaring at each other, Gourry turned to Luke with a question. “By any chance… do those two not have the best relationship…?”

“Correct.” Luke’s answer was mixed with a sigh.

* * *

“What… is that…?” It was noon. Gourry gazed far down the main road, suddenly mumbling something.

Even though Memphis demolished the inn, with some smooth talking, the next day I convinced everyone that the inn was destroyed by a stray demon and everything worked out peacefully. Now our party was heading for an Elven village. Our purpose was to reinforce our armament, so we headed to a place in the direction of Gyria City. For us, we were going back in the direction we came from. Now, Gourry stared in the direction of the city we passed through the day before yesterday.

“That?”

“I see something… like smoke…”

!!!

At his words, Luke, Milina and I instantly turned to eachother. The three of us knew how abnormally good his eyesight is.

“Smoke? I can’t see…”

“Is that so? There’s no mistaking– Ah! What the?!” Mr. Milgazia and Memphis were saying as the four of us took off, leaving them behind.

“Are you certain?”

“It’s no mistake!” Mr. Milgazia questioned me as he ran to catch up with us, and I answered him clearly. “The content of his brain isn’t much, but his eyes are definite!”

“Hey… Lina…”

“I see. If it’s as you say…” Mr. Milgazia said, cutting off Gourry’s objections. “Then this isn’t the time to be slowly running.”

“Huh?”

“Rollaza Road” Mr. Milgazia whispered instantly.

Whoosh! With the sensation of being pulled, my field of vision suddenly changed.

“Wha?!” I wasn’t the only one who suddenly cried out. We were all– at considerable speed– dashing down the main road. But my legs weren’t moving.

“Don’t be frightened. This is Mr. Milgazia’s spell.” Memphis said with her arms crossed and a composed look on her face.

If I looked down, my feet were still firmly planted on the ground, as if I was stopped. And yet our party continued to progress forward. There’s no way… Does this mean the earth spirits are intervening? Is the earth moving beneath us?! No… if that was true, we should be able to feel the wind….unless of course the wind is intervening

too…?

If that's the case then it's an unnecessarily high level spell. Controlling the usually immobile ground to move at high speeds would put strain on other places. More than just forming a wind barrier, you're also controlling the speed and direction of the ground movement, which should cause the wind to blow. But wait… a Human's magical capacity doesn't even compare to a Dragon's. Of course, if you have a head and you're listening to what I'm saying you'd know that. A spell of this level, simply for moving, couldn't be used just by casting a spell…

…… Wait a minute…….

"Mr. Milgazia, where did you learn this? This spell? If you're usually a dragon, why would you need a spell like this? Can't you just fly?"

To my question Mr. Milgazia answered, "Ah. It's because when I started traveling with Memphy I had to hold a human form. Traveling was inconvenient, so I tried developing a spell for it."

Tried… developing a spell… This old man… He says it like he's giving me some wise bit of life advice. Dragons. They sure are… something. With as much as I know, it's like there are things out there that are just meant to deceive me.

"That's definitely smoke." Milgazia sighed, while starting to progress a bit further. Having come all this distance, the rest of us cold see it clearly. Surely, it was as Gourry said as we were continuing down the main road a moment ago. Rising into the sky, there were several stripes of ash-colored smoke. There before our

eyes as we were coming closer–

“I saw something!” someone cried as we passed over a small hill. The hill sloped gently down to a small city surrounded by a spread of forest. –a small city wrapped in flames and panic. From this distance we could see the forms of people running away. And then, once again demolishing the town was a horde of Lesser Demons. There were some people who tried to fight back, but there was a considerable amount of demons. On top of that, there were still more coming in from the forest as reinforcements.

“Demons, eh?” Taking a glance at the city, Memphis nimbly took a small step forward. And then– Fwoosh! With a sound like a gust of wind, white wings sprouted from her back. –No. The back of that weird armor suddenly transformed into a pair of long, thin, wings.

“I’m going ahead, Elder.”

“That’s excessive.” Mr. Milgazia nodded and Memphis gave a little wink. And then gently, Memphis’ feet separated from the ground. Instantly–

Boom!

With a sound that pierced the air, only a trail of white remained as she went whirling off into the sky! With Mr. Milgazia’s spell she was able to move at considerable speeds and now she was easily winning the race, moving in a straight line towards the village. Leaving the rest of us behind in our barrier, Memphis’ form became smaller and smaller as she got farther and farther away. At the same time, the white armor expanded, wrapping around Memphis’ body

and increasing in size.

"No way…" I murmured, completely dumbfounded. And then– The elf transformed into a white giant and alighted down among the demons.

* * *

A white light mowed into the ground, transforming who knows how many demons into dust, and blowing them, along with bits of vegetation from the forest, into the sky….No matter how you look at it, is it really okay for an elf to be burning down the forest like this? She must have a spontaneous and childish lifestyle. And destruction of the forest is taboo.

…Why does it feel like I've heard that somewhere before…? Or could it be that because of Memphis' mentality she was paired with Mr. Milgazia to balance it out? At any rate, by the time we finally arrived at the city, most of the demons were already being kicked around. Of course, even so, demons were still entering the city. Memphis, having transformed into a white giant, and as you'd expect, was crashing into demons and buildings indiscriminately. And as you'd expect, on this end we weren't doing anything at all. All right! If it's come to this, let's take this time to show them our skills! We'll vanquish all of the demons then we'll go to the town mayor, vehemently argue that we did them a favor, and get a nice little reward!

Milgazia canceled his movement spell and we all went running towards the city. Among the demons, a few of them noticed us coming forward, and we were met with glares of hostility. Hmph! A

horde of Lesser demons without any direction, to us may as well be an angry mob! We'll knock them around easily. I chanted a spell in my mouth.

"Zelas Phalanx"

But before I could finish reciting it, Mr. Milgazia released several balls of lights which pursued and crushed the surrounding demons.

"……."

I automatically interrupted my spell. Just standing in the same place. Gourry, Luke and Milina basically did the same, standing there with flat expressions.

Probably, just now… it was like multiple Zelas Brid spells but… No, they were used at point blank…

"Something wrong? You're just standing there. We still haven't even entered the city, let's go."

"…oh…."

"I…I guess…"

"Shall we… go?"

"…sure…."

At Mr. Milgazia's words, the four of us, half dumb-founded, once again headed for the city.

* * *

"It seems we're done here, Elder." After stamping out the

rampaging demons, she spoke to us with her back turned… er, more like she was addressing Mr. Milgazia alone. Memphis looked back at us, having returned from being a white giant to her original form.

"And the demons that were in the forest?"

"But of course. I didn't leave a single one alive." After answering Mr. Milgazia's question she pivoted toward us. "And I see the rest of you gave it your best effort."

…bitch. Obviously Mr. Milgazia finished his spell before me, and its power was no match for a human. Of course, Memphis probably knew that. She knew, and yet when we couldn't contribute, she anticipated it and laid on the sarcasm. Where that's concerned, winning with sarcasm is still just sarcasm! A big grin came to my face.

"Oh no, effort? We didn't use any effort. Inside the city it was Mr. Milgazia's power that did away with the enemy. And he did it without the use of your armor. Well. It really is amazing. Your *armor*."

P-p-p-piku!

"So then… Am I hearing that it's not me, but my armor that's amazing? Or could it be I am mistaken?"

"You're misunderstanding, normally you only depend on your armor, it doesn't have anything to do with winning or losing. Thinking like that, you'll probably develop an inferiority complex."

"Ufufufufu… that's quite a thing to say…"

"Oh, no. It's not like I can win with an ill-tempered elf in the

area."

Our mouths returned to smirks, with the intent to kill in our eyes. How many more times would Memphis and I end up like this? It'd be ridiculous to count, since now we had started glaring at each other again.

"But… that armor, what the heck is it really?" Not noticing the tense atmosphere, Gourry asked from the side. In response, Memphis turned to him and puffed out her chest.

"This is a weapon developed by the joint effort of the Dragons and we, the Elves. Elder Milgazia is wearing some as well. The main feature of Elder's Ritual armor, is amplified intervention from the Astral plane. The average grade pure Mazoku, shouldn't be able to face Elder as he is now. As for me, my armor has the ability to intervene on the Astral plane, but with a degree of free control. And by controlling it with my own consciousness, it becomes semi-live armor. We call it Zanaffar Armor."

"Whew. Just as I thought that armor's more than…" Half ignoring most of it, I suddenly froze. Controlled intervention from the Astral Plane…? Semi-live…? Zanaffar…? Wait, that's—!?

I automatically drew back and pointed at Memphis.

"Zanaffar?! Th-There's no way you mean the Magical Beast Zanaffar?!" Revived from a manuscript of the recorded knowledge of Sorcery from a parallel universe, the Claire Bible, the living armor, the sealed armored Zanaffar… The one who 100 years ago destroyed Sairaag, the city of Sorcery and following that… only a short while ago, Gourry and I faced in a fight to the death. It can completely cut-

off someone from the Astral plane, and the light it emits is similar to a Golden Dragon's laser breath. But the Zanaffar we know… From the beginning it takes the form of armor, but over time it captures its wearer. Eventually, they go mad and transform into a giant magical beast. That said… There's no way this…

"It seems that's what humans call it. It was originally called 'Magic Regulator" which is probably the meaning of the chaos words."

"Probably? ….Hey! What the hell are you wearing?!"

"When the Kouma War came, we were hopeless and didn't have much time." The one who said this was Mr. Milgazia. "We seriously invested in our fighting power against the Mazoku. Back then, we didn't know how powerless we were. At that time, our main forces- a family of dragons– weren't defeated by one of the five retainers of the Dark Lord, but a single priest. Before the end of the battle came, we prepared for the eventual Mazoku invasion. So we launched development on various weapons….Lina Inverse. I once led you to the Claire Bible. How do you think I knew the way?"

"…Ah!"

I see. It gradually came to me. Mr. Milgazia had to struggle to find the path he knows now. Which means he had to go there many times. With the knowledge of another world, they could make weapons to resist the Mazoku. If that's the same source of wisdom of the Claire Bible, when I was looking for a spell to defeat Mazoku, under the same means, he was struggling to find the same answer and Zanaffar was sufficient.

“But… well, when we visited we had Xellos with us. And you didn’t resist against him. Why not?”

“Manufacture of the weapons was being done in the Elf village. Going against him without any equipment would have been suicide.”

“I-I see… so that’s how it is… Ah, but…” I glanced at Memphis again. “There’s no way that… that would… go crazy and eat the wearer, right?” At my timid question, Memphis furrowed her brow.

“Why would you ask that? There’s no reason for that to happen….well, surely for humans who have such meagerly magic capacity, it might lose control. There probably has been someone in the human world to go crazy. Without comprehending the knowledge of the Claire Bible, haven’t there been humans who have irresponsibly crafted defective spells?”

“Look, are you happy now?! Can you stop snarling at me behind my back?! Your bad attitude is all this guy’s fault! Does that mean anything to you?!”

“You’re quite stuck on that last question, now aren’t you? Anyway, there’ no need to worry about it. They Elves test the magical ability of those who wear the equipment. There’s a reason they won’t just go loaning it out to you humans… it seems Zanaffar’s ill-nature is contagious.”

“Oho~ another insult lacking originality, eh?”

“Oh no no. It wasn’t an insult. I was just returning a favor. Ufufufufu….”

“Heheheheheh.”

“At the end of the day, these two are still glaring at eachother.” Luke muttered in a tone of surrender. That’s right, Luke and Milina didn’t follow us to the Claire Bible. Trying to look cool about it, they had completely given up on understanding. Or by any chance, in this world, ignorance is bliss I guess…? And then whenever someone tried to say something, Memphis would open her mouth and…

“Guys!”

I’ve heard that voice before… in some other place, I know I’ve heard it.

“Hoe?” If I looked in the direction of the voice, coming down the road, there was a guy heading toward us. And I knew his face.

“You’re–”

“Thank God… I found you.”

“That one gatekeeper!”

At my words……

I forgot his name. The Gatekeeper from Gyria City fell flat on his face.

A Mazoku Sighting in the City We Returned to.

"What the hell's wrong with him…?" I asked, stopped in a corner of the city free of pedestrian traffic. If that's true, we should have this kind of complicated conversation over breakfast. That's what I'd like to do, but from the demon attack a while ago, the city was still in confusion. With the terror of the raid lingering, we shouldn't be talking about such disturbing things in front of the townspeople.

"Uhh… that's… well…." The gatekeeper, Maius muttered in a biting, foul tone. Smoothly he sent a glance towards Memphis and Milgazia. Of course up until now, We had all more or less introduced ourselves. To avoid the conversation getting complicated, Memphis and Mr. Milgazia were just 'some friends you can trust.'

Maius introduced himself as 'That one gatekeeper. Nothing more.' as if he was complaining. He then added 'We met in Gyria City.' That considered, Maius and the four of us were already acquaintances. Only a small degree of acquaintances, but more than Mr. Milgazia and Memphis who were first meeting him. It's probably hard to talk about something difficult in front of people you're meeting for the first time.

"How do I say this… It seems the issue still hasn't been settled." after some hesitation he finally managed to say.

"Huh…?"

"After you all left, demons suddenly started appearing within the city."

“?!”

The six of us all looked at each other. A demon outbreak? In the city?!

“I thought maybe you could lend us your power once more, so I followed you.”

“I thought so. Once again, someone relying on us to solve their problemmssssss”

“Could you give us some more details?”

Luke muttered and sighed, but his mouth was shut by Milina’s question.

There was a bit of silence, then he answered “The night you all left… all around the city– Lesser Demons? Is that what you call them? They started appearing suddenly.”

“All around? So then how many?” He nodded to my question.

“There was one in each place but… they all appeared simultaneously so I don’t know how many places… That was the first time I saw the demons” remembering back, Maius turned pale and silent. It’s not unreasonable. For us, Lesser and Brass demons are just weaklings. But for ordinary soldiers and sorcerers, they’re an enemy you don’t mess around with. With their tough hides and high magical abilities, dull swords and common offensive magic won’t deal much damage. And Maius probably didn’t have any real combat experience, probably not anything more than a threat.

“With the cooperation from guards and mercenaries, and various others, we were somehow able to defeat the ones we did but… It was

the next day. Jade came to visit…”

“Jade?”

“A knight we met during the Gyria City incident.” In response to Mr. Milgazia’s question, I returned a thoroughly broad answer.

“Jade said that… the castle couldn’t be entered or exited.

“Huh?” At the moment I couldn’t understand what he was talking about. I furrowed my brow a little. “So… they told him ‘you may not enter’ or…?”

“No, that’s not it. Not just Jade. No one could enter or exit the castle. I didn’t see this firsthand but Jade told me. From the previous night onward,

The castle gates were closed, and we don’t know the situation inside.”

“What the… Hold on, does that mean when the demons appeared, no reinforcements were sent from the castle?!”

“…it seems… that is true.”

“….”

Even though it was hard for him to answer that, I was still at a loss for words. Usually if demons appear within a city, the castle will immediately send soldiers to counterattack. That’s the normal reaction anyway. So then, they didn’t send reinforcements and the gates still didn’t open in the morning, which means… I can think of two possibilities. The king is severely lacking in guts– er, either he’s cowardly or something happened inside the castle.

“Jade said that there wasn’t anything going on inside the castle. But then, he checked the situation inside the castle himself and there’s no doubt something unusual was happening. Probably because we had too much on our hands, he wanted to call you all back. That’s what he told me. –Of course, we will give you proper gratitude, that is to say…”

“……”

I silently turned toward Mr. Milgazia and Memphis. The appearance of demons inside Gyria City after we defeated General Sherra. And now the sealed palace. I don’t think by any means this is unrelated to the Mazoku’s plans but… It seems the other two are of the same opinion, as they silently nodded when I glanced at them.

“Understood then. Let’s go. To Gyria City.”

Thus our party aimed for Gyria City once more.

* * *

The city was… silent. Is wasn’t the peaceful kind of silent. It was the kind of silence that brings fear and anxiety. Ten days hadn’t passed since we departed from here. At the time, the streets were lined with stalls and children were running about. It was ordinary life, having nothing to do with what was going on at the palace. But now… the amount of street stalls had remarkably decreased. The people who were walking down the street did so anxiously, at a brisk pace as if someone was pushing them along. The capital city of the kingdom of Dils, Gyria City– where we had met Maius some days ago. On the way, we didn’t really have any trouble, and our party finally arrived in this city. When we originally came here, there

was a check at the outer wall, but now there wasn't even a soldier there. The chain of command has really broken down here, huh?

"For now we need to go see Jade. That isn't a problem right?" there were no objections to Maius' proposal. Without first knowing the details of the situation we couldn't move.

Jade's house was destroyed in the previous incident. In the end, when Jade returned to being a knight, it would be in poor taste to have a homeless knight, so he was supplied with an uninhabited residence by the kingdom. But…

"He isn't here, is he?" Milina said as we stood at the entrance knocking on the door.

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

"Spiderwebs." She answered Maius as he stood with his hand reaching for the door. Now that you mention it, there was a small spiderweb between the door knocker and the door. And that wasn't all. Several spiderwebs clung to the designs carved into the door as well. A spider can build a web in half a day, but I don't think it could have built this many overnight. Which means it's a been some days since Jade opened the door to this house.

“Seems like it’s been a while since he came back.”

“Yeah… there’s no sign of anyone inside, huh.” Luke and Gourry agreed, nodding up and down.

“Well then… The city? Or is it the castle?”

“Maybe.” In response to Maius I spoke in a firm tone. Jade had said to him that he was going to investigate the situation at the castle. So then there’s a possibility that when he went to the castle to investigate, he ran into some kind of trouble, at least that was my first thought. It was a spontaneous thought but… ‘Something happened inside the castle’ and ‘Jade went to investigate at the castle and never returned’ aren’t very interesting deductions to make.

“Anyway, no matter how we move, we’re going to need information. What happened when we left the city– Can you think of a place where we can hear multiple views of what happened? Maius?”

“If that’s it… there’s a fairly useful shop we use, but… I wonder if he’s safe… Jade…”

“ ……. “

Maius wasn’t speaking to anyone specifically. And not a single person returned an answer.

* * *

“I don’t know what the hell happened.” the man spat after downing some strong vodka. We were at a restaurant and tavern, in a corner of the city. From it’s appearance, it was a perfectly… it was commonly referred to as a ‘cheerful and clean establishment.’ But

the moment the sun set, it somehow became a gathering place for lowly, rotten, people. Maius was speaking with one of them. Judging from his appearance, he was a mercenary, probably one of Maius' colleagues. His eyes cloudy with alcohol and his face marked with stubble, he seemed to be one of those 'lowly, rotten, people.'

"The reason I don't know anything is cuz I've been drinkin' all day! How'm I s'pose ta know anythin'? Huh, Maius?"

"I-I'm sure whatever you can tell us is fine. Due to circumstances, I've been away from the city since the day after the demons appeared. So I don't know anything from then until now."

He filled his cup with alcohol while speaking (poorly) to Maius, but then with a sullen look on his face, "Hohooo~ Away from the city, huh? Well that's– well that's just great for you. You know what the rest of us had to go through? Do you? Hunh?! Do you wanna know?" With his eyes fixed, he drew near as Maius recoiled from his gaze. And then–

"WE GET IT!"

Smack!!

My scream combined with the sound of an empty wooden cup hitting him in the head, made a nice noise. I had grown tired of the stagnation in the shop and pierced the silence.

"Wh…?!

"I've been listening in the whoooooole time! This guy's been drinking the day away to escape his problems! You don't get to talk about what you've gone through! You say 'you don't know what

we've been through' but you wouldn't even know unless someone explained it to you! We need to know what's going on so tell us all you know!

"Wh-Who the hell are you?!"

"The hell are you saying? That doesn't matter! Now tell us what's going on!"

"D-Don't you order me around! You just hit me over the head outta nowhere and then you expect me to obediently say 'Oh yes, so that's how it is~' Who the hell would wanna talk to you after something like that?!"

"Just do it!"

"Go to hell!"

He and I stared at each other, sparks igniting between our eyes…

"Oho~ well whatever happens, if you don't feel like telling us…"

"Oh!"

Clearly and plainly I said to him, then bang! I pointed at Mr. Milgazia. "At any rate, if you want to be difficult I'll make you listen to one of Mr. Milgazia's jokes!"

"What's that supposed to mean, human girl?" This one time I could ignore one of Mr. Milgazia's jokes.

"Ah? What's wrong with my jokes? Why would you say that?"

"Phew… I'll let you know immediately! Mr. Milgazia, right

now, tell us the best joke you know!”

“Wh-What is this… all of a sudden?

“It’s fine. Please.”

“Well… I don’t really mind… This was a little while ago, when I started traveling with Memphy.”

And so, on my command, and while a little confused, Mr. Milgazia began *The Tale*.

* * *

Even in death, silence is the same, completely controlled by the space. With a single joke, Mr. Milgazia brought on this silence.

What have I done…

The silence. It was like being stuck at the bottom of the mud. From the bottom of my heart, I regretted my mistake. I had allowed Mr. Milgazia to tell the joke in the presence of allies. That is to say, it had entered my own ears. At this time, I started to know. In this world, stored away in memories, as if they were coldly rejected by consciousness— There is a joke that can’t be explained with words.

Dragon humor… for a while, I thought I just couldn’t understand it. But certainly, this… From the intense blow, the only ones remaining calm were Mr. Milgazia himself and Gourry. Luke and Maius had fallen over. Milina, wearing the guise of composure, stared ahead with her forehead drenched in sweat. Memphis had slammed her head into the table and was convulsing all over. The other customers of the shop, who had carelessly listened in were completely done for.

“What does this mean? Humans…” There wasn’t anyone left in the shop with enough energy to answer Mr. Milgazia’s disappointed question.

Wait! Just then, Memphis stood up, wobbling as she said in a shaky voice, “That… that was the best, Elder. That joke just now…”

“Are you trying to take the title from him?!! With that shitty gag?!! I seriously thought she was trembling with pain, or she couldn’t talk from her stomach aching, but here she is stepping up to the plate! I thought I didn’t understand Dragon humor, but I *really* don’t understand Elf humor.

“P-Pardon me. I was wrong.”

“No, I was wrong too. I’m sorry.”

Somehow, Maius’ acquaintance had managed to stand up and now spoke to me, as did I, with my head hung obediently.

“It was a bit long-winded, but what do you mean…?” Mr. Milgazia asked again. Of course, no one had the energy to answer. Maybe… if we used Mr. Milgazia’s jokes as psychological warfare, we could easily defeat a mid-rank pure Mazoku…

“Forgive me for whatever I was saying before. The truth is… there are some things I know…” the man said, after we had all somehow gotten ourselves up and regained our energy. “From then on, every night, the demons have appeared here and there. They haven’t come out at all during the day but… it’s been practically every night. There have been times where one would appear around dawn, but during the night, there could be five or six. There have

even been times where several would gather in the same place. To make matters worse, the castle gates have been closed. We haven't received reinforcements, let alone any orders. We don't know if it's because they're afraid of the demons or if there's some other reason… Anyway, everyone's tired of it. There are even some guys who have left the city. Even friends can be deceive. And that's how it is. Tonight, even if the demons don't come to you, I guarantee it won't be like that in other places. As for me, if I was somehow destined to leave, I should have gone a long time ago. If it goes on any longer than this, it'll be more than just a complaint. And that's all I know."

Whoa. That's more than just knowing a little.

"Then… have you heard the rumors about why the castle is on lockdown?"

"Rumors, yeah. I've heard a ton of 'em. They say the king lost his nerve and barricaded himself in, or there's the theory that an assassin from another kingdom already killed him and the castle was shut down to keep the secret from leaking out. Before that, they were saying the female general who was tried as a spy was actually still alive and made the command. Other stories say demons have been in the castle for a long time, wreaking havoc."

"……"

At the slovenly man's words, I looked at the others. So either the King lost his nerve or was assassinated. Either situation would be fine…. at least, compared to the others, which wouldn't be good at all. They'd be problems on a national level. But if it was true that

Sherra survived or Mazoku were attacking the castle, it would be inexcusable to write it off as 'just another disaster in Dils.'

"So the situation inside the castle hasn't been circulated at all? Maybe the merchants going in and out of the city…"

"We can't help that merchants can't enter or exit the city. They probably can't afford to enter the walls. There might be someone willing to enter just because of what's going on here, but from listening to what I'm telling you, you can guess there's no one like that here. If there ever was, I wonder if he even got out safely…"

Hm… That's about all I can gather from that story.

"Thanks. That helps."

"Yeah. Right, right. Now it may be unnecessary but there is one more thing." Starting to thank me, he added "Since the mercenary recruitment, blood's been pooling in the city. Other than the demons, there are other sorts of dangers. Keeping the castle locked down… the guards' colleagues… that kind of stuff." He said in a self deprecating way then gulped down his drink all at once. "That's how it is. You guys be careful."

At that Memphis threw out a response."It'll be okay. If things turn out like that, we'll smash the enemy, and everything will be just fine."

"Stop that."

She answered calmly and immediately the rest of us stepped in to object. When we were being attacked by Mazoku in the middle of an inn, she nonchalantly released Zanaffar– no, Zanaffar's light beam.

The day she 'smashes the enemy,' Gyria City will be turned into a scorched patch of land before the Mazoku even mobilize.

"Thanks for the warning. Well, anyway, for now let's go back to Maius' place and work out a strat–" Again, as I was getting out of my seat, I had to stop. I noticed Maius was still planted face down on the table. This guy… he still hasn't recovered from the damage of being forced t listen to Mr. Milgazia's joke…

* * *

"It's sooooooooo small. You humans really have to live in places like this, huh?" When we arrived at Maius' home, Memphis was the first to speak.

It was on the second floor of a relatively new housing complex in the residential area. Maius lived in a single room. From listening to him before, I guessed this place was for mercenaries who had come to Gyria City from other places. Soldiers don't make much money so they can really only afford to rent a room. Well, the surrounding neighborhoods are probably nicer.

"Well, about that… this was originally meant for one person…"

Ignoring what Maius was saying, Memphis looked around the room. "First of all, it lacks warmth. To put it shortly, that's the real tone I get. The walls and floor are covered in plaster, and until now I've only stayed in human hotels but… even though it's connected to other spaces, the window is pretty small. But more than anything, there isn't a single tree growing here."

That's just unreasonable. Unreasonable. For one, any room

would feel small if it's six people over the capacity.

"Well, you can complain at the walls all you like afterward. The problem is what do we do after this?" Memphis glared at me, but someone spoke up before her.

"After this… We should probably sneak into the castle and gather information. Isn't that the quickest way? Well, it might be kind of a reckless method." Mr. Milgazia nodded at what Luke had said.

"Certainly. I can guess from the way the human boy speaks that more than that, by continuing to look for information here, there's a low chance of hearing anything beneficial. If we do hear any new information, we won't know if it's real or just a rumor unless we check. Eventually, we'll have to know the situation inside the castle. Once we've left the castle we can do more easygoing things.

That is, if we can get in." We all nodded a that.

After listening to more stories at the restaurant and tavern, we set out for some easy reconnaissance at the castle. It was a simple method. Coming in close, everyone except Gourry and Maius used a levitation spell. We were then able to roughly survey the area from the sky. There, there was only spacious castle grounds and buildings. In the courtyard, scattered corpses of soldiers

–were nowhere to be seen. Which was fortunate. But the figures of people were nowhere to be found. Which makes for a strange story. Usually there are soldiers doing some kind of training or visibly attractive people mingling between the buildings. But when we looked down at the castle grounds from the sky, nothing was

moving. Eventually, after watching for a short while, at someone's suggestion we alighted down where we had come from. This is what we agreed to at Maius' home.

But we didn't even bother talking about not trying to enter the castle. In the end, that's the conclusion we all came to.

"We can't really help that time will pass, so tonight we will promptly– There aren't any objections, are there?" Everyone nodded again.

"U-Um…" Maius said nervously. "A-Am I… going too?"

"……"

Without any unnecessary dialogue like 'you can't come because you'll just get in the way' we all instantly went silent.

"We need a base!" I said distinctly. "If we run into any trouble in the castle, for instance, if we all have to run away and end up scattered– This is going to be our meeting place. I've decided, since we all should be able to get back here. That means I want you to stay here on standby."

"If that's how it is… Understood!" His face lit up after what I had said. Just as I thought. He didn't even want to go into the castle. "I, Maius shall devote myself completely to the duty of securing the base!"

Memphis braced herself and then with a big smile on her face, "Okay. That's good, because if you came you'd just get in the way."

Ah…. *This bitch just came right out and said it.* I don't know if she realized it or not but Memphis was frozen there with a big grin

on her face.

* * *

The moon was thin in the night sky and we could see innumerable twinkling stars. This was the ideal night to be infiltrating from the sky.

“They’re bright, aren’t they?” Mr. Milgazia sighed. Using levitation, we could all travel through the sky at the same pace.

We aimed for where we were before, where we had stopped for a while on the outspread castle grounds. On the facilities, there was pale light pouring out from windows here and there. Though I’m not sure whether it was from lamps or light spells. Anyway.

“Somehow it seems like no one’s here… Usually, there should be a limitless amount of people but…” Beside me, Memphis controlled a flight spell. Nimbly, and in line with me she said “If what you said now was serious, then this isn’t looking so good.”

“You’re being fussy.” I immediately gave her a discouraging answer. I can’t determine how much of it was her putting up a front, but even I repeatedly acknowledged it.

At any rate, right now I had Gourry clinging to my back. Out of the six of us, only one couldn’t cast the spell, so naturally he wouldn’t be able to cross the sky. Of course someone had to carry him. To make a long story short, when the subject came up, everyone’s stares fell on me. So now I was like this. Piggy-backing Gourry with a boosted levitation spell, and heading toward the castle.

“Keheh. Relationships are nice, eh, you two? You’re putting

Milina and I's love to shame. Right, Mili…na…." He shifted his glance from us, who he was teasing, to Milina, who intercepted him with an icy stare. Luke gulped down the latter half of what he was going to say.

"By the way, Lina,"

"WHAA?! H-Hey! Gourry! Don't just suddenly start talking in my ear like that!"

"Ah, sorry, sorry. Anyway, entering isn't a problem, but which building are we heading for?"

"Which? We discussed that earlier. We're entering through the west tower."

The castle was encircled by an exterior wall. Built around the central palace building were four towers, East, West, South, and North, respectively. The lower half of each tower wall was connected to a square building with a path to the central palace. There are a few more facilities independent from those, but that's the basic structure. The point of infiltration we chose was the main gate, which was a little way off from the west tower.

"Wait… that's it over there… There's light. And aren't those people? Over there."

"Ugh. Now that you mention it…"

I hesitated after Gourry pointed it out. The building beneath the tower was probably some kind of barracks. And the building we were aiming for, had pale light pouring from the windows.

"What should we do? Change of plans?" At Mr. Milgazia's

question, I thought for a minute then shook my head.

"If there are people there… then there'll be people in other buildings too. And if we try looking around for a place where no one is around, we won't gather much information."

"I feel the same. If we insist on the cautious theory, the situation won't progress much further." Mr. Milgazia nodded at me and Milina's opinion. So we all headed to the north tower, drawing closer to the light coming from the window.

The window was inlaid with opaque glass, so we couldn't see what was going on inside. Well, military installations. If you can say its obvious, then it's obvious.

I masked my presence, even though I brought my ear close, I couldn't hear anything inside. There was the faint presence of something in there but… I couldn't tell if it was human or something else. I couldn't even tell what kind of human it was.

What should we do?

I didn't speak. I asked everyone with my eyes. I was answered with looks from Luke and Mr. Milgazia. They both simultaneously glanced toward the same place: the building's entrance. They're saying we should go inside. From the others, objections– well, it didn't look like there were any other opinions. We all canceled our spells and landed in front of the door. Armed soldiers went to and from the building comfortably through a large armored double door. Gourry and Luke, without even making the sounds of footsteps, crept around to the left and right sides of the door. I came close to the front, checking the variety of locks. Around the handle, there

was just one rustic keyhole. A primitive one. This would be an easy victory with some wire. So from under my shoulder guard, I pulled out a length of wire. Why am I storing something like this? Listen and I shall tell you, that women are full of secrets.

I worked with the wire in my right hand, and my left hand I placed on the door and… gii… pop! Just like that, it went in. And the door opened inward.

"Wh-What the–?!"

"What's wrong?!"

"Who the hell are these people?"

All at once. The presences and the voices came out. The door opened into a small hall. There, what appeared to be soldiers and their colleagues were either sitting or leaning against the wall. There were about 20 or 30 of them. Somehow, correspondence tells me they had been sleeping until now… and the door… opened without even using a key…

"Who the hell are you people?"

"No– um, we're not suspicious people." To the single drowsy soldier who questioned our identity, I answered waving my hands around wildly.

"Not suspicious huh? Then why are you out at a time like this with a wire in one hand?"

Ugh! Right now… smooth talking…! But before I could think of a good reason, someone beat me to it.

“Weellll, we actually came from outside the castle. But like this we don’t know what’s going on inside the castle.” Scratching his head and without any sign of shyness, Gourry just came out and said it. You’re just gonna tell the truth?! How can you just say it like that?!

“Huh. So that’s how it is.” the soldier sighed.

You’re just gonna go along with that?!

“You’re not surprised?”

The soldier answered Milina’s question while scratching his jaw with one finger. “Well… you guys came from outside… I forget how many of you there have been but uh… anyway, you get really lax. Well, just between you and me… I kind of don’t understand or agree with our most recent orders. In any case, come on in.” Somehow, unexpectedly we were given a friendly invitation. And we, while a little confused, entered through the door.

“Sorry ’bout closing the door. It’s annoying to look out at the palace all the time. I heard that… Outside the castle there were all sorts of disturbances going on.”

“It’s not just ‘all sorts of disturbances’! Every night there are demons popping up all over the place out there! It’s not a disturbance, it’s a disaster! With all that going on, how can you all sit in here smiling like it’s somebody else’s problem?!” With a menacing look, I went on and on all in one breath.

The soldier recoiled a bit and said “W-We can’t help it! We were ordered not to leave the building! …Truth is, we’re all pretty sick of

it. Not being able to see our families, all we have to eat are crappy emergency provisions…"

"You can't leave the building? Why's that?"

"Don't know. The higher-ups persistently tell us their objective is top secret and everything will be fine if we follow orders. I really don't get it, but if we disobey we'll be sent to the detention barracks. So it's better to just follow the stupid rules." the soldier– probably a commanding officer, from the way he took control– sighed a little at that. "I bet you all came here because you thought you could do something about this, right? …Actually, it's a little hard to say this… but there was one more order…"

"One… more…?" *I have a bad feeling about this.*

The soldier hesitated and then told us, "When someone did come from the outside… they told us anyone who came in from outside… was to be arrested… and jailed…."

…!

After the soldier said that, the room started to stir.

"Whoa now, guys. I really don't want to be thrown in jail. Why do you need to do that?" Luke said as he slowly reached for the handle of his sword.

"If we obediently go to the jail, we won't need to fight, do we?" He stopped when he heard Milina's calm voice.

"What? What are you–?!"

Ignoring Memphis' protest, she continued, "We and you both

want to know the truth. That much hasn't changed. But your orders are absolute: jail any intruders from outside. But, you weren't ordered to disarm any cooperative intruders or put new intruders in a different cell than previously arrested intruders. As long as you treat us well, we'll obediently follow."

"Uhhh…" The soldier groaned a little.

I see. So that's how you're doing things, Milina. Before us, someone else came from outside– That's what the soldier said anyway. Naturally they arrested him and shoved him in jail. It's perfectly likely that the intruder was Jade. She intends to tell them that if they have any honor, they'll lead us to the guy who was previously captured so we can try to get through this matter. Of course, if they don't want to listen to us, we can fight like Luke said. Either way doesn't matter. It's a messy theory– well, no. The previous theory was messy. The key point being, our job is to resolve the soldiers' dilemma.

"We definitely haven't been given orders like that." Another soldier said shamelessly.

"And anyway, without knowing why they closed off the castle, it sucks just sitting around like we're half dead. You said so yourself, Captain." said yet another soldier.

The soldier in front of us– the captain– brought a bitter smile to his face and sighed.

"I see. It's just as you say. There were no such orders. So, it's decided. You will be promptly guided– er, rather, could we say 'taken' to the jail?"

“Any objections?” Milina asked as she turned to face us. We smiled reluctantly and nodded. Well, it seems Gourry was a little slow on the circumstances but…

“Um… so then the plan… what’s going on?”

“We can go along with him, okay?”

I whispered an answer back in response to Gourry’s stealthily asked question.

“Well then, follow me.” Leading us with a lamp in one hand, we walked along in succession behind the captain.

We were followed behind by other soldiers carrying lamps in one hand. Proceeding into the building, we passed numerous doors, which stretched into long and narrow paths to the left and right.

“Watch your step.” The captain said, as we started heading down the path to the right.

On both sides were stone walls, and wedged in between was this narrow space with a relatively high ceiling. Other than the lamps held by soldiers in front of and behind us, there was no light. Which made it hard to tell clearly, but it felt like the pathway gently curved. That means we must be inside the outer wall of the castle.

“Sure, sure. Hey can I ask you something? Of the people whc were arrested for coming here, was there a guy by the name of Jade?”

“Jade?” Around that time, I was growing a little tired of walking. At my question, the guard ahead of us looked back at me for a second. “By any chance is that the guy who recently had his knighthood revoked and was ordered to be exiled? Then for some

reason they let him return?"

"Yeah, that Jade."

"I don't know how bad this is but… the guy we arrested, I only heard his name once in passing but… Most likely, he's in the prison in the north tower basement. Usually we shove all the prisoners in there but… Actually, there's supposed to be some kind of basement beneath the palace. We take turns arresting people so there's a possibility some of our colleagues took him there."

Hearing that, Luke sighed. "So you're saying… around here, arresting people is just busy work…"

"H-Hey now, don't get violent all of a sudden. You promised you'd cooperate if we arrested you."

"Heh. I know that. If I got violent here, all the painstaking negotiations that my beloved Milina went through, would all be in vain. And if that happened I could never forgive my soul."

……..

"…no one's gonna retort that? …It's really dead in here…" Luke whispered weakly.

The rest of us continued on without paying any attention to his joke. Hmm. If Milina doesn't retort his jokes, it probably feels pretty lonely. The poor guy's got it pretty hard.

"Well if Jade isn't in the North tower… There are others who came in from outside. Among them, there are some who regularly came in and out of the castle before all of this happened. I don't know how much useful information you can get out of them, but

they might be able to tell you some things."

"About how many intruders are there?"

Casually listening to me, the captain thought for a little while. "Not counting you guys… there are about twenty.

"Twenty people?!" I cried out.

"Yeah. Soldiers who were stationed out in the city and palace officials who happened to have business out there. As far as I know, it's around twenty people, but there could be more than that. Yeah, and all of them said the same thing, that the city was in danger. Practically all of us soldiers have family out in the city, so there wasn't a single one of us who wasn't worried. To be honest, a lot of us wanted to leave here immediately. But orders from the top said to be on standby, leaving is prohibited. Some were thrown in jail just for protesting those orders. After all, us soldiers are just tools for the higher officers. Tools with willpower, mind you."

…But they listened to Milina. If they're carrying out orders, usually they wouldn't have listened to her reckless plan. If we were actually assassins or something, you'd think we'd just be waiting for an opportunity like this.

I guess they really can't stand it, this situation. Being on standby, following cryptic orders, all while their families might be being attacked by demons outside the castle. It must be tough carrying that anxiety and continuing to be a loyal soldier.

"Anyway, we're counting on you to quickly put an end to this situation which we don't know the meaning of." As the captain

whispered that, he revealed his– no, all of the soldiers' sentiments. And with that he held his tongue. After walking a while, he eventually stopped. There, a door opened to one side. The space wasn't much different from the previous building's make. The soldiers in the room gave a minor salute.

"Intruders from outside the castle. We're taking them to the jail." He said simply as he headed toward a nearby door and started descending down the stairs to the basement. Seeing that we were still armed, the soldiers in the room didn't look doubtful at all and courteously saluted to the captain. Man… these guys have no motivation.

Our party headed down the stairs and after long last we arrived in front of a door where there was a single, unenthusiastic guard. He and the captain exchanged apathetic salutes, and then from his breast pocket he removed a ring of jangling keys and opened the door. Characteristic of a basement, the damp smell stuck in my nose. There was a stone path that stretched far forward. Either side of the path was lined with armored lattices and candles released the smell of burning tallow. The path was teeming with the smell of god-knows-what rotting with a hint of sweat. But our party continued on, led by the captain. Within the jail were shadows of various people. Men clad in rags met us with hollow stares. Men of ambiguous ages walked in circles around their cells grumbling to themselves without taking any notice of us. And then–

"You are–!"

From one side I heard a voice that I had heard somewhere before. By now I was really fed up with this march.

eh…? When I turned toward the cell that it had come from, there was a bearded, middle-aged man.

“By any chance… aren’t you the ones who were with Jade Codewell that time?!” The man who said it had a very worn out looking face. Within the cell was General Alce.

* * *

“What on earth happened…?”

The captain put the three men in the cell with General Alce and the women in the cell across from them. Then without saying anything he left. I questioned General– former General Alce from across the path and through the lattice. In an incident a short while ago, he sucked up to the king by introducing him to Sherra, without knowing she was a Mazoku. Which basically means he was the instigator to that incident. And knowing she went on a rampage after that, requires some contemplation in itself. Eventually when we were wrapping that matter up, he single-handedly dedicated himself to tying up the loose ends. And finally, he resigned from the rank of general. So he’s not a bad guy, the old man just doesn’t have the ability to judge character. But after all that, if he’s here then…

“You all are probably the same as me. You sneaked through the castle gates to inquire about the situation inside, and when you found out, you were arrested…” he said with an exhaustive sigh.

“Just as you said. We don’t know what’s happening inside the castle.” Mr. Milgazia said with his arms crossed, leaning his back against the wall. For Alce this should’ve been his first time meeting Mr. Milgazia, but he didn’t even have enough energy to ask about

who he was. Unphased, Alce continued talking.

"I certainly don't understand things clearly. Right now I'm retired, but until a short while ago I held the rank of General. I had much influence among the soldiers, and even King Wells. When I was arrested I begged the soldiers to send for His Highness but… when they came back, a meeting wasn't necessary. I was ordered to be imprisoned…"

"Whoa. He's some king, isn't he?"

"No… it's probably not his Highness' fault." He didn't get angry at Luke's vilification. He only shook his head. "To be honest, I highly doubt that what I said ever reached His Highness' ear."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I asked the soldiers to relay the message, of course the soldiers didn't personally pass that message on to the king. It would go from soldier to commanding officer, then from there either the prime minster or the cabinet minster, who would then pass it on to His Highness. If somewhere along the way someone thought it was unnecessary for the King to hear it because the original order was imprisonment, then he wouldn't receive it."

"Hmmm…" I started thinking about it. "Let me ask you something. Without you or Sherra around, King Wells would have some sort of influential person near him. Is there anyone who's been promoted that far within the past year?"

"Within the past year? Well.. Practically all of them were."

"Huh…?" My eyes went small at his unexpected answer.

Everyone holding a position in this kingdom was promoted to their position within the past year? What the… The former general continued speaking, as if he was answering the question I was thinking.

"Actually, you're visiting this city after the great fire of last year. With the anxiety that it caused, the previous King, Dils Cort Gyria, was ailing. Without any heirs, his younger brother King Wells was appointed to the throne. He was at the center of a national power struggle. In all of the drama surrounding the changing of the king, the prime minister and cabinet minister were pushed off into other positions and replaced with new ones. Though I'll tell you, that's partially because from a young age, King Wells, did things like teaching fencing." The former general said with a bitter smile.

Ugh… To the tell the truth… I had something to do with the great fire last year and hearing about it made my ears hurt a little. But there's nothing I can do about it now.

"S-So… is there anyone who wasn't in the castle a year ago, but now holds an important position?"

Alce twisted his neck again. "Wasn't in the castle… Well, there's the trade minister, Surdian. He's not in a high position, but he has a lot of influence with the king. And then there's the court sorcerer, Faliarl. Surdian was promoted because of his ties with a relative of the queen– King Wells' wife. Faliarl was recommended by the Sorcerer's Guild."

"Hmm. I see. So then, are the two of them in the palace now?"

"Probably… they'd be…" Roughly he explained the palace's

interior and where the two might be. “Mhm. Then what do these two look like?”

“Surdian is a bout 30 years old. He’s a nice man. Thin, pale, with a black goatee that doesn’t suit him very well. Faliarl I think is around 20… and his name and title don’t match his physique. He’s a robust man with dark skin. Do those kind of descriptions work for you?” In response to his question I stood up.

“I’ve decided. We’re breaking out of here and going to try and find these two.”

“H-Hey wait. We haven’t heard the whole story. Not at all.” When Luke raised his voice in protest, I shot a fleeting glance at him.

“Let me tell you something. Only one of us killed killed Sherra. It was *me*.”

At that, everyone groaned a little.

As it is, Mazoku have the power to hold a human form.

It could be that Sherra wasn’t the only scheming Mazoku to enter this kingdom. When we defeated her it felt like everything was resolved, but what if another Mazoku was hiding at the center of the Kingdom? With the recent chain of events, whoever it is is plotting something. Thinking like that makes the story consistent. Up until the great fire a year ago, Mazoku from the Kataart mountains were hiding here, planning on raising the banner of revolt under the rule of Chaos Dragon Gaav. So there could still be Mazoku concealing themselves here. Going by what Alce said, I believe it’s either the

trade minister or the court sorcerer. That said, we need to break out of here quickly and try to talk to these guys directly. Of course, if they are Mazoku and we tried talking to them, they'd be really stupid if they answered us truthfully. But we do have Mr. Milgazia and Memphis with us. If one of them is a Mazoku borrowing a human form, they won't trick these two.

"But I wasn't done talking…"

We never told Alce that Sherra was Mazoku. I wonder how much time should pass before I explain things to him.

"It was starting to drag on. We'll get a detailed account when time allows for it. For now, let's get our of here, Gourry. Gently, now!"

"Right! I really don't know what's going on, but as long as you say we're leaving!"

"That's all you need to know! Let's quickly say goodbye to this clammy place! C'mon, guys we're bailing out of here."

As everyone agreed with me, Gourry's sword flashed. There was a sharp, hard sound like ice shaking. And then– Clang-Cla-Clang! There was a flashy sound as a number of bars were sliced at the top and bottom, and went rolling to the floor.

Ooooooooooooohhh.

With that technique, there was a stir in the surrounding jail cells. The bars the cell used were about as thick as a ring formed by one's index finger and thumb. To cut through them so easily– and that many at the same time. The sword Gourry held, the one of unknown origin, had some sort of magic attached to it. It's cutting ability was far greater than a usual sword. Of course, even without it, Gourry's skill was transcendent as ever.

"Okay, stand over there." Gourry said as he left his cell and came toward ours. The sword flashed again. And again, the metal bars were reduced to short poles tumbling to the floor.

"The soldiers will come if you behave too violently." Alce said without leaving the cell. I answered him with the wave of my hand. And with that, we all went running toward the exit. Before us was the wooden door that we had passed through before. Mr. Milgazia was the furthest ahead, and as usual by placing one hand on the door it opened easily without a key. When it was last opened there should have been soldiers on lookout, but now there weren't any to be seen.

"That captain probably arranged for this." I said. It seems the soldiers have allied themselves with us. Our party ran up the stone steps and stopped when we arrived at the top. The real problem starts here. Going by what the captain said, this is probably the North tower. Which means there should be quite a few guards. I didn't even have the time to hesitate. The next door opened and from there emerged the face of a single soldier.

"That was fast… Everything okay now? Well anyway,

everything's been settled on this end." He said in an easy-going voice, the captain who had guided us here.

"Settled… Is that… okay? Before…" If grateful is the right word, then I was definitely grateful. But this service was going far beyond deserving gratitude. At my outburst, a bitter-smile came to the captain's face.

"To tell the truth… Today isn't the first time I saw you all. Not along ago, there was a female general who had a lot of influence over this kingdom, though I'm not sure why. The night she disappeared, I saw you guys at the castle."

Oh yeah, that night. There were probably several soldiers who witnessed us. Of course, I can't remember the face of everyone I go against, but he remembered us. Which means…

"The soldiers in the castle are just tools. We don't have the power to change anything. But when you came here that time, things changed. I thought that maybe, somehow you would be able to change this situation too."

"You're wrong." Mr. Milgazia said to him.

"Wrong?"

"You said you don't have the power to change anything. When you said that, human, you were wrong. You are changing things right now. More than the present, think about what you want to do for the future. You have loaned us your power. What that means is that you– all of you have the power to spin the future. You are not limited to being mere tools. You've proven that."

“ …..” The captain was silent for a short while.

“…On that note, he’s not as disappointed with you as you think… He was thanking you. Well, anyway, we shouldn’t be standing around here talking. Let’s go. Be careful, okay?”

I gave a small nod, and passed through the door that the captain pointed out. Eventually after passing through several more doors, we emerged in a spacious room. The room was built the same way as the room we first entered in the west tower. So, just as expected it was full of soldiers.

“We heard everything. Do your best.”

“Though I don’t really know what you’ll be doing your best at.”

“But if you get too flashy, it’ll be more work for us.”

All of the soldiers were laughing. Either they were really displeased with the orders from the top, or the captain is secretly a really popular guy. Anyhow, with the soldiers voices sending us off, we opened the door and ran outside.

“…eh?” I automatically cried out a little. The *four* of us stopped in our tracks. We were in the soldier’s meeting hall.

“huh?”

“What the? Just now… weren’t we…?”

Voices spread out from where the soldiers were. That’s right. The six of us should have passed through that door and be standing in the garden facing the palace right now. But now it was just the four of us, Without Mr. Milgazia or Memphis.

“W-What the hell is this?!”

I knew the answer to Luke’s question. “Distorted space… it’s probably Mazoku.”

!!!

When the word ‘mazoku’ left my mouth, the clamor from the soldiers grew louder. With a fearless laugh, Luke responded. “I see, I don’t know what your theory is, but you divided our forces, so… Mr. Enemy is either aiming for us four or the other two…”

“Actually… it’s all of you.” The muffled voice that answered Luke came from the ceiling. When one of the soldiers looked to where the voice had originated from, he let out a little scream. Hanging upside down from the ceiling was a girl’s head.

The Mazoku– Mianzo.

Passing Through the Palace, the Mazoku Gather

“Fel Za Rhed!”

There was no use arguing about it. The fuse of battle was already lit. And so Milina released her attack. A spiral of light turned through the air, heading toward the Mazoku on the ceiling. But–

BOOM!

From the end of one of Mianzo’s roots, a sphere of light formed. It easily intercepted the attack spell coming toward it. Magic power striking against magic power, the spells canceled each other out.

“Uwaahh!?”

With the sound of the explosion as a signal, there was a panic among the soldiers. Some of the ones here probably saw Mazoku last time. But the outward appearance of this one has a pretty big mental impact.

Some of them readied their swords and lances, those who stood near the open door didn’t hesitate to make an escape. But the swords and spears couldn’t reach the high ceiling. Even if they could, they wouldn’t have any effect on a pure Mazoku. The soldiers who did escape, because of the way space had been tampered with, appeared back in the hall from the door on the opposite side of the room, increasing the confusion more and more. And then a part of Mianzo’s roots– the one that had just now released a sphere of light– started to swell. Is she planning on growing another head?

But the inflated bump grew until it had surpassed the size of a girl's head.

Shplurt… plop.

With a disgusting sound, the bump burst open and a black mass dropped to the floor far below. It made a soft sound upon landing and slowly stood up. It was about as tall as one of the soldier's heads. It's body was thin, as if it had dried up, and stained black. Like some kind of mummy. Though he had the bizarre form of a distorted human, a violet light shined from his partly opened eyes, just to prove that it wasn't undead or anything.

"The Mazoku– The Mazoku gave birth?!"

"No, one was concealed within the other." I said to a frightened Milina, shaking my head.

"Uwaaah?!" The soldiers who suddenly appeared inside panicked, and with their swords and lances in hand, they headed for the black Mazoku.

Thunk! Thunk!

The sound of a thick impact. A number of blades appeared and targeted the soldiers, injuring some. But their comrades didn't seem concerned. The cluster of blades went after the soldiers, and like this the Mazoku was able to easily pierce through their bodies. As they were pierced, the ends of its lips warped– into the shape of a smile.

"Fall back!" Gourry yelled and dashed away. But he was a moment too late.

Gourry ran out of the way. The soldiers ran forward. The

Mazoku waved both hands and with a heavy wet sound, a number of soldiers hit the floor. Their bodies had been reduced to chunks of meat.

“Bastard!!” Gourry readied his sword and charged the black Mazoku.

Clang!

Instantly he jumped back, swinging his sword to the side. From a nearby suit of armor, a silver blade came out and attacked him.

Wait a second! There’s still more?!

It’s true form slowly oozed out of the armor as Gourry was locked with the silver blade. It was a silver–

Pond skeeter.

Wait, no. It was the same height as a human. And the part that should have been a pond skeeter, the upper half, was about the same as a human. It’s organs hung out, as if they had been tampered with.

“Kikekekeke!” A cry like a strange bird rang out and the black Mazoku approached Gourry! Then–

D–! Luke mowed into it with his sword.

“It just keeps coming and coming and coming! It’s pissing me off!” When the black Mazoku saw the Magic sword Luke held in his hands, it jumped back, widening the space between them. Of course, at the time, Milina and I weren’t just standing there watching.

“Elmekia Lance!”

“Elmekia Flame!”

I released a boosted spell and Milina released hers a moment after to delay the time of impact. We aimed for Mianzo on the ceiling, not allowing her to buy any time– That is, if she stayed clinging up there. Slyly– Without any hesitation, Mianzo unstuck herself and fell to the floor below. Our two spells only struck ceiling.

But it wasn’t a failure. This was just fine. Before, swords couldn’t reach her, but now the soldiers couldn’t help preparing to strike. And by dragging her down to the floor it had become quite the battle. Arriving on the ground’s surface, water spewed all over the surrounding area from the blank-staring girl’s mouth. Blood sprayed upward. Soldiers fell. The trajectory of the water approached Gourry’s back—

Dyub!

A nearby soldier lunged his lance into her cheek, cutting off the torrent of water so that it was no more than a shower, spraying the surrounding area. I get it! Attacking Mianzo doesn’t deal much damage, but by attacking the water, we can decrease it’s momentum! In that case…

Mianzo’s root grew larger, knocking into the soldier who had attacked her with the lance. Using force, the lance popped out of the girl’s cheek. At that time, Milina and I were already closing in on the Mazoku. The girl’s face turned toward us and– too slow!

Milina produced a dagger from her bosom and again stuck it into the girl’s cheek. Water sprayed at the two of us. She had already lost

the ability to win. With this little pressure, it was no more than just water. In her panic, it looked as if Mianzo was trying to grow another head nearby. In no time, I also pulled a dagger from around my chest. Milina and I had both completed our spells–

?!

I kicked the floor and Milina dove to the side as if she were going for a body slam In an instant, the space where we had been standing was pierced by an outstretched white hand. Penetrating the empty space, slowly from within Mianzo, it crawled out.

A *fourth* Mazoku.

H-How many of them is she keeping in there?!

It was a pure white Mazoku with four arms to make up for its– though I don't know if it actually did– lack of a head.

"You dodged it… just now?" A surprised voice came from the white Mazoku.

That was definitely dangerous. I didn't give up on buying some space. At that moment, an endlessly bad feeling ran down my spine, instantly causing me to move. I didn't have time to explain it. Milina and I exchanged glances, then went running toward the white Mazoku.

* * *

Gourry was at an overwhelming disadvantage. At least, he should have been. The six legged Mazoku used its three inside legs to stand on while attacking Gourry with the remaining three. Speed and sharpness were no shortcoming, with a three-handed attack coming

from separate directions. Even though Gourry was of more than common skill, he was still handling the fight with with all he could. Well, actually, he was overwhelmed. But the Mazoku had made a mistake. They underestimated the four of us. Certainly, with the soldiers here, there was a possibility we could deal a fatal blow.

However–

"Forward!" With a yell, the soldiers simultaneously lunged a number of lances at the silver Mazoku, who then coiled an extended leg around them. The lances did no damage and with the Mazoku's actions, he could stop them from moving. But that gave Gourry more than enough time.

"Hah!" With his sword, Gourry cut off the tips of the lances along with the Mazoku's legs. The Silver Mazoku let out a scream filled with the agony of death, that sounded exactly like the chirping of an insect. It crumbled to the floor breaking apart like pottery.

"You saved us!"

Turning from the soldiers who threw out cries of gratitude, Gourry headed toward Mianzo.

* * *

The White Mazoku stood at the ready. Before we could close the distance between us, Milina and I dove to the left and right. At the same time, we released the spells we had been casting.

“Fel Za Rhed!”

“Hell Blast!”

Right toward Mianzo who was preoccupied by Gourry charging at her. A white light scorched her face as a lance of death pierced through her tangled roots.

“Aieeeeeee!!” A scream rang out as Mianzo was transformed into a pillar of ash. As her body crumbled, Gourry rushed in with his sword and pierced the flustered white Mazoku.

* * *

“…How much further do I have to push you?!” A metal blade bathed in light sliced through the black Mazoku. “Be a little more serious if you’re gonna gather us all here! Don’t make light of us because we’re human!” With his magically amplified sword, Luke defeated the black Mazoku without any significant trouble. And at just the right moment, the short battle was over.

* * *

“S-Strong…” one soldier murmured in a partial daze.

Though it had been a bit dangerous, not much time had passed since the start of the battle. And Gourry and I, along with Luke and Milina, had become quite skilled at fighting Mazoku, so we’ve picked up a few tricks. That is, quick battles, one-hit kills, and the element of surprise. With our way of life, you can’t help picking up skills like these. It’s not like I feel like it’s not a big deal but… I just don’t like to think about it. Of course this time, the Mazoku didn’t take into account how much the soldiers could help us. Though the

damage the soldiers received was by no means small. There were only some that were uninjured, and more than a few suffered serious injuries, which we didn't know until we checked how many had been cut.

"Is there anyone who hasn't suffered severe injuries?! We can treat your wounds a little with healing magic!"

"Can we get an examination over here?!"

"Sorry, here too!"

I called out as I surveyed the room, and voices responded to me here and there.

"We have ointment and bandages!" one soldier said heading toward the next room.

Excluding those with minor injuries, the wound situation– well, it didn't look so good. Luke, Milina, and I used recovery spells to roughly close the mouths around the wounds. This spell is just the beginning though. It only temporarily speeds up the body's reparation process. How many people could we save like this? To be honest, I have no confidence in myself. If Mr. Milgazia were here, there's a higher level healing spell– Resurrection– that he could use all around. But that probably won't happen…

"Ointment and bandages here!"

"Okay! I'll be roughly patching wounds over here. And I'll keep patching til the very end, and I'll keep treating people til the very end! Follow me with those ointment and bandages. Now that the situation's calmed down, the actual doctor… Hey, where are those

bandages?!”

Noise. Everyone was stirring around me. I instinctively raised my voice, but now I noticed that things had calmed down. This room had been isolated in warped space, and now that space had disappeared.

“Can we go out?! Can we leave the room?!” One soldier cried out as he opened the door to the courtyard… and walked out.

“If we can… You guys are fine. Go.” Another soldier said looking at us. “Somehow we’ll manage to treat the wounded. But… I don’t know if something’s happening at the castle to cause Mazoku to gather here, but if we’re up against Mazoku, you’re the only ones who can do anything. So… go.”

…!

At those words, I took a small gulp.

“I’m…begging you… go…” A hoarse voice came from one of the soldiers who had been attacked by Mianzo. “We’re… fine… Go…” He said. His face was pale as he forced a smile.

“I know this sounds like we’re begging you to save us, but if you guys managed to take care of what happened here, then these guys can manage to give medical attention. So please–”

“Understood.” I nodded. The four of us turned and headed back outside as the soldiers watched our backs.

–Outside it was dark, with an entire sky full of stars.–

“Those two aren’t here, huh?” Gourry murmured as he looked

around. That's right. We were separated when we passed through the door. I couldn't guess where Mr. Milgazia and Memphis went.

"Hey now… you don't think, they were injured or something, do you?" Luke said ominously. Well it's not like there's no chance of that but… I feel like I should think more positively.

"There's a chance that… they were probably fighting in a strange closed space just like we were. I think they just got out before us.

"I see. If not the old dragon, then the Elf girl would say something like that. 'The likes of humans are only a burden. Shall we go, Elder?' or something like that." *Oh yeah. Memphis would say that.* "So whatever we do, we'll have to make the first move, right?" Milina said, glancing toward me.

We stood there in the darkness facing the palace.

* * *

From the door, the inside of the palace was quiet. We were at the North rear entrance. There we waited, peeking into the castle. At least from the quiet it didn't seem like Mr. Milgazia and Memphis were currently struggling.

"So anyway… it doesn't seem like anyone is nearby." Gourry said in a low voice as he clung to the door, peeking in. Hm. If that's the case… I examined the lock.

"Gourry, from this gap, can you break the latch?"

"Uh, probably." For my nearly impossible request, Gourry's answer was pretty relaxed. He stood up in front of the door. The others stepped back.

“Huff!”

With a grunt, the afterimage of a silver arc was left in the darkness. There was a small ringing sound like the guard of a sword being struck, and then, the lock was cut off.

“Seriously, this guy’s ridiculously skilled… as usual.” Luke muttered something that sounded like both admiration and disgust, as Gourry slowly opened the door. We entered through there into a spacious lobby which continued into an outstretched corridor. Using a light spell that I had curbed the brightness of, I couldn’t see any human figures around.

“That’s odd. There isn’t a single guard watching the entrances.”

“Yeah. Probably a trap.” Luke nodded at Milina.

“At any rate, we have no choice but to go inside. The trade minister and the court sorcerer… Anyway, let’s try looking nearby.” Everyone nodded at me and we began following the route former general Alce had taught us.

“By the way Gourry, there’s something that’s been on my mind for a while. Has your sword always been that sharp?” Muting the sounds of our footsteps as we proceeded down the hall, I whispered to Gourry. Certainly, the sword in his hand was a sharp magic sword. It could bisect a pure Mazoku in a single slash, though I don’t think that’s it’s true power…

“Oh, this? See, the guy who was here before, …Mil… whatever you called him.”

“You don’t mean… Mr. Milgazia…?”

“Yeah. That guy.”

…Hey you… He’s only been *traveling with us*. You already forgot his name?

“That guy said that this sword had a big weakness against Mazoku, so he drew this weird pattern on the sword to make it stronger.”

“Uh…huh?” The way he didn’t even hesitate to say it made my eyes go small. Stronger… then… “I-I didn’t hear about that. H-Hey when–!”

“Now that you mention it, I guess I forgot to tell you.”

Hey.

A pattern… Does that mean a carved design seal with strength amplification magic? That’s a sorcery technique we don’t know. That must mean…

“Gourry <3 After all this, let me see that sword, okay? <3”

“It’s fine if you just want to see it but… Wait, you aren’t planning on secretly switching it with another sword and selling it to someone for a high price are you?”

“What are you saying? There’s no reason for me to do that before the investigation’s over.”

“…But you’d do it after the investigation’s over? …hey…”

“Well, that’s… Who knows what the future holds!”

“So then–” Gourry cut his sentence short and stopped walking.

Catching on, the rest of us stopped. The hallway stretching far back was still vacant. Only silence came from the rows of doors to the left and right. And in front of us… was a single door at the end of the hall. As per the plan, we were supposed to pass through that door but…

"…is someone there?"

"No." Gourry said, staring at the door in front of us. "Some*thing*."

At that word, the threads of nervousness tightened. That means whatever is behind that door, isn't human.

"What should we do? Take a different route?" Luke let out a small snort. "If we quietly go around and take a different path we won't have to fight."

"Certainly. If we thoughtlessly move around, we'll get stabbed in the back instead of moving forward and maybe getting pinched." Milina nodded at that. And with that it was decided. Someone started walking again and we all stopped in front of the door.

"It's open. Please, come in." A voice said from behind the door.

* * *

Inside there was a little bit of a hall. I'm not sure what the room's purpose was, but there were doors leading to four different directions. At the end of the room there was a staircase that led upwards, and at the center of the room was a man.

He wore loose indigo robes with some kind of embroidered design, probably to show off his social status. By his appearance he

looked to be about thirty. He had a pale, handsome face with an unbecoming goatee. One wrong step and he wouldn't have had those robes, revealing him as just some skinny guy. But hidden in his stare was a sharp gleam that refused to be called that.

That appearance. By any chance…

"I would like to welcome you this evening. This is my first time seeing you all. I am called Surdian, ostensibly, this kingdom's Minister of Trade."

I knew it was this guy. This is the one Alce was talking about. I gave a wry smile.

"Ostensibly, huh? So this is pretty serious, isn't it? You were never planning on deceiving us, you just wanted to confront us directly. Am I understanding you correctly?"

"You are not mistaken in thinking that." He said shamelessly as he took a deep bow.

…hm. So it's come to this.

To tell the truth, I had only been thinking about what I would do if he had claimed to be a human then called the soldiers on us. I mean, this way should be just as easy to deal with, but I still didn't think he would directly challenge us to a fight. But I'm very confident that I can do this. He's a Mazoku holding a human form, which means he's far stronger than he seems. In that case, it's natural to think that Surdian here has considerable power. Of course, he won't be any stronger than Sherra was… at least that's what I want to think.

“So you’re the puppet master in all this?! What kind of bullshit are you planning?!” Luke barked.

A smile came to Surdian’s face.

“While it may be impolite, I’m afraid I can’t tell you that. At any rate, for the time being, I have arranged for a pawn I would like for you to do battle with. Now then, let me introduce you…” And with the snap of Surdian’s fingers…

Flying down the stairs from the second floor and joining Surdian at his side came a red shadow. His entire body looked like hardened clay that had been kneaded with blood. Its face was flat without eyes, a nose, a mouth or ears, and all over his body ran a black striped design. And then in one hand he held a sword. Instantly, a shiver ran down my spine. This is… There’s no way!

“Hey, you’re not just gonna keep calling down minions are you?” Luke said without realizing what *that* was. But Surdian only shook his head.

“Oh no, no. Sending a mob of subordinates to fight you would be the epitome of impoliteness. Therefore I have personally and carefully selected an opponent for you. Let me introduce you. This is a demon made using a technique that was suggested by Lord General Sherra. I am pleased to introduce you to Jade Codewell.”

!!!

As Surdian said it, we all froze in place.

* * *

I have a bad feeling about this. By the laws of nature, lesser demons and brass demons can't come into existence on their own. But if a low ranking Mazoku were to possess something like a small animal, which has practically no ego, they can transform its flesh into a new being. But that sort of thing doesn't happen willingly. A sorcerer– or a high-level Mazoku, would have to intervene to cause it to appear. The appearance of demons outside of the castle was probably caused when the one pulling the strings of this incident had a small animal from the city– a dog, a cat, a mouse– possessed by a low level Mazoku and transformed into a demon. While it's likely that small animals were turned into demons, humans on their own have too much sense of self to be possessed by low-level Mazoku.

–usually.

However, if by some method the ego temporarily breaks down, then it's possible that a Mazoku could possess the body from the Astral Plane and transform it into a demon. Actually before now, we had faced something like this. In fact, it was Jade's father, Grancis Codewell. Using Sherra's sword Dulgofa, his ego was destroyed and he was transformed into a demon with a human shape. I had the exact same impression of the one standing beside Surdian. From the moment I first saw it, I sensed it– My mind was running with the worst possibilities, and I was terrified.

My bad feeling– had been spot on.

Then again, if Surdian really wanted to disturb us, he couldn't do it by feeding us any old boring lie. I think there's a chance that the one in front of us isn't Jade. But Jade went missing after he said

he was going to investigate the castle… Of course, if they weren't holding Jade captive then he wouldn't be able to lie to us about this being Jade. So there's still a chance that he's lying.

Conversely, if they had captured Jade, the Mazoku would probably want to use him as a tool. Thinking like that, then the one in front of us is just as I thought…

"You… You bastard… Why…" Luke growled as he ground his teeth. Surdian only grinned in return.

"Be careful guys. This Surdian guy, despite how he looks, should be pretty powerful." At that, Surdian smiled bitterly.

"Despite how I look…? You're a very rude human, aren't you? I for one, by no means will allow you to repent for such rudeness. Let us begin. Jade." With the snap of a finger as a signal, Jade kicked the ground.

There's no other way… than to fight!

We all drew our swords and moved out of the way. Jade first attacked Gourry, as the rest of us began chanting our spells. We knew Jade's sword skill from before. If it's just simple swordsmanship, I'm probably better, though not as good as Luke, and I've sparred with Gourry before. But being possessed by demons and having no sense of self, I wonder how much his skill has changed. I can't really know unless I actually fight him. In the end, I looked to where Gourry and Jade– At the same instant, they both drew their swords.

…hu–

Beside Gourry, Surdian suddenly appeared! Did he cross space?! Surdian produced an orb of magic and turned toward Gourry–

But a moment before he could release it, without any preparation, Gourry took a great step backward.

"What?!" Surdian cried in astonishment, but the ball of magic had already been released. But by stepping back suddenly, he was able to take a deep step toward the fallen Jade.

He's on course for a direct hit! But– With one swing of his sword, Jade mowed into the ball of light. *Does he have a magic sword?!*

In doing so, Jade's stomach was left open. Without a moment's delay, Gourry stepped forward and–

"I think I messed up–!"

The blade formed an arc… and the transformation happened instantly. From 'Jade's face of red mud striped with black, into the human face of Jade Codewell.

!!!

Although he didn't have any hair, having a face he recognized suddenly appearing right before his eyes, Gourry faltered. With his quick reflexes and an unusual sword, he stopped just before reaching Jade's body. Without chanting a spell, Jade produced a ball of magic, and released it. Right toward Gourry, directly in front of him. There was no room to avoid it. But if it hits him directly—!

BOOM!

A white light glared and the sound of an explosion rose up. Gourry had been blown back!

"Gourry?!" I interrupted my spell and ran over to him in a panic. Jade instantly pursued after him, but Luke and Milina released their two spells to hinder his movements.

"Gourry…"

"K–!"

Ah… as I was running toward him he stood up easily, once again with his sword at the ready. That should have been… a direct attack… right? But around his stomach it was stained dark. Though it didn't look like an injury.

"Hey… Are you okay…?"

"I blocked it with the handle of my sword. For now– Let's go!" As he said it he went running after Jade again. I… I see… To avoid a direct attack, in that instant when the ball of light exploded, he simultaneously jumped back to weaken the force of the blow. Man… this guy really does have superhuman reflexes… *Well, anyway*.

Once again I started reciting a spell and confronted Surdian.

"Ch! Impertinence!" Surdian produced an innumerable amount of magic balls, releasing them toward me!

Blam! Blam! Blam!

Jumping out of the way, as our bodies avoided them, our feet thrust through small eruptions over and over again. Persisting

through the explosions, Jade came right at us! His face transforming again into an expressionless human face. Of course, just because he had a human face, doesn't mean he had returned to being human. It was just to mentally shake us up. I knew that but… all the same, it's hard to do anything when someone you know's body has been transfigured, but the same face is still clinging to it. Actually, all of us seemed to lose our bearings a bit when heading for Jade. Even so, on Jade's end, he plunged toward us, without paying it any mind. His target was the one closest to him– Milina.

Clang!

The two swords combined, causing a hard sound. Pulling back his sword, Jade lunged forward. Milina swept her sword to the side, as if she was letting Jade's sword slide, then scooped it up and changed it into a slash. Jade retreated back a step to avoid it, then released a ball of light.

"Fel Za Rhed!"

Milina released the spell she had finished chanting. The moment she intercepted the light she jumped back to put some distance between them. But before Jade could pursue her, Luke backed her up from the side, charging in with his sword flashing. Gourry turned the opposite direction. Leaving Jade and aiming for Surdian standing there before him.

Clang!

At that moment Luke caught Jade's sword with his own.

"Dolph Stratsushu!" The attack spell Luke chanted was heading

toward Surdian. In order to avoid intercepting the spell, Gourry needed to use that interval to close in on the enemy. It's difficult to coordinate something like that….Usually. But without any confusion or noise, Surdian's form disappeared suddenly.

He's crossing space again. Surdian's form disappeared that instant. Milina and I ran toward Luke, while Gourry pivoted on one foot, swinging his sword to one side. Surdian reappeared– right in the sword's trajectory.

"Gaahhh?!"

At the moment he appeared, the sword mowed into his stomach, causing him to fly far back.

Yes! It wasn't a fatal wound, but it served it's purpose well.

"Th-This is absurd!"

While floundering to widen the distance, Surdian looked flat-out disturbed. Even so, he still saw us as an easy target.

In the moment when Luke coordinated his spell with Gourry, I had a bad feeling that Surdian would cross space and evade us. Because after he crossed, where would he reappear? This was only a bad premonition, but if he did, who would he appear *behind*? Of course we couldn't predict where he would cross to until he actually did, but we moved in such a way that we could support whoever he popped up behind. In order not to be immediately attacked from behind, as well as to make sure Luke didn't get attacked while matched with Jade, Milina and I followed.

While Gourry was watching his own back, it's as if his own

body was part of the counterattack. And so Surdian chose to appear in the worst possible place for him.

"Elmekia Lance!" Surdian appeared some distance from Gourry, and I released the spell I had been reciting. Having that timing, Gourry went plunging in.

"–tt!"

Surdian's face showed a look of hesitation. Crossing space over and over again, you can't help but get comfortable with it, which is probably what happened. Not being able to help staying in that same place, when my spell went flying at him he batted it away with one hand.

"Gah?!"

When it hit him, it was larger than he had expected. When a human uses Elmekia Lance, it's strong enough to take out a Lesser demon in one hit, but for a Mazoku with that much power, by no means should it cause a fatal wound. With a direct hit, I'm not saying it wouldn't hurt, but hitting him in the hand wouldn't be enough to take him down. But for Surdian, choosing to go where Gourry was counterattacking and swatting with one hand, was his own bad luck. Because I had used Boost, it must have felt like he ran his hand into a heavy weight. Surdian flinched, and at that moment Gourry lunged forward with his sword. He slashed him diagonally from the shoulder and caused him to cry out a third time.

Gourry turned his sword but before he could strike again, Surdian had anxiously disappeared from sight for a third time. He reappeared far from the rest of us, at the edge of the room. His

expression had distorted into a look of extreme hatred.– No. It had transformed into something bizarre. Within his warped eyelids, there were no longer eyes, but black caverns. His black hair and beard had twisted into an assembly of small black horns. But that doesn't mean this was his true form. When damaged, it becomes difficult to continue holding a human form.

"You bastards…" All of the composure had disappeared from Surdian's voice.

* * *

Luke's attack's gradually pressed down on Jade. Occasionally Jade would release magic power, but Luke would see through it, then avoid it. It was useless to try fixing the distance. That said, Luke must have been bothered by Jade's face, as his attacks lacked conviction. Realizing that Surdian had moved to the edge of the room, Milina switched her gaze toward Jade. If we could defeat him first, then we could all work together to defeat Surdian. Milina headed for Jade, chanting a spell…

Boom!

Before she could finish, A shockwave suddenly appeared, blowing Luke, Milina, and even Jade, away.

Wha…?!

Though they received more than an insignificant amount of damage, they still got right up and prepared themselves from a distance. The attack that sent the three of them flying, wasn't released by Surdian. Within the room, one more presence appeared,

opposite of Surdian.

"It's not very hard is it? Fighting humans. That's clumsy of you, Surdian. The one who said it was a large man with dark skin. This appearance… I see. It wasn't a matter of *which* one, because it was both of them. The court sorcerer, Faliarl. Another Mazoku in the shape of a human.

* * *

"Don't interfere Faliarl!" Surdian's voice was full of rage. "I told them they would only be facing the two of us!"

"I know what you told them. But I can't stand by and watch this disappointment. So I'm voluntarily adding myself to the fight, without listening to your instructions." He said arrogantly as he walked toward me.

"Don't underestimate them, Faliarl! These people defeated Lord Sherra! And not by luck or accident!"

"I know." Faliarl said as he raised a hand in my direction. Instantly, Gourry was there before me, protecting me. And then–

Bam!

A powerful shockwave shook my eardrums, but it wasn't the same as the one that had blown into the other three. The aftershock alone made the walls quiver, causing small fragments of debris to sprinkle down. If that had hit me directly, it might have shattered my bones and ruptured my organs– If Gourry hadn't cut it down with his sword. He probably didn't think it would be unreasonable for the sword to cut through a shockwave. Faliarl's eyebrow moved a little. I

jumped to the side, releasing the spell I had been casting.

“Zelas Brid!”

The light I released created the afterimage of a band heading toward Faliarl. A spell that follows it’s target, if it hits, it should be pretty painful!

Keeping pace with the band of light, Gourry ran forward. Without moving from where he was, Faliarl released around ten orbs of light toward Gourry! As you’d expect, Gourry was prepared for anything. He stopped in his tracks, turned his sword sideways and– At that moment, all of the balls that Faliarl released suddenly changed trajectory, and pierced through my band of light.

Just by those orbs crashing into it, my band of light was extinguished. Gourry had stopped in order to feign a target, so when my spell was actually intercepted, our coordination fell apart.

Good! Surdian was wrong to to take us lightly!

Gourrykicked the floor, going after Faliarl again. And once again I chanted a spell in my–

?!

I felt something that resembled a cold chill, and instantly I dove to the side. At that moment I was surrounded by a silver afterimage.

–Jade!

clang!

Next he went for a stabbing attack, And I narrowly caught it by drawing my short sword.

* * *

Surdian aimed for Milina, kicking the ground and running. He headed directly for her as she prepared her sword and chanted a spell. Without slowing down, Surdian produced two balls of light and released them at Milina. She dashed in the opposite direction, slipping through the lights.

Just then– Boom! The balls of light burst open. With the force of the explosion pressing at her back, Milina sped up, and lost her balance.

Surdian moved to close the distance between him and Milina. Instantly, something moved in from the side. Luke had plunged in with his sword. The blade was carrying magic power. In his hand he held what I called the Magic Absorbing Sword. I didn't know when he charged it, but the sword has the ability to absorb and store magic power, then release it at will. I don't know what spell it was charged with right now, but Surdian probably isn't too worried about it. It passed by Milina's side and approached Surdian. Milina fixed her posture so that she could continue– Surdian vanished. Crossing space, he reappeared–

As I had already released my spell and just narrowly caught Jade's blow, Surdian reappeared behind me! This is bad! From where I am no one can cover me! And he could fire off a spell immediately after. And right now I can't let go with my hands! Eeek! I'm desperate here! I purposefully pressed down on Jade's sword, and with all my might, I jumped backwards. By that I mean, onto Surdian.

“Ugh?!”

Surdian and I ended up piled on eachother groaning a little. Since my enemy is a pure mazoku, he wouldn’t have expected a primitive attack like a body check, so he was completely caught off guard and lost his balance. And by retreating backward I was able to put some distance between Jade and Surdian.

“……uh!”

I winced at the burning pain. Somehow in the moment when I jumped back at him, it seems Surdian had produced a ball of magic. Gathering together, the power burned my back. I couldn’t see the wound myself, but I was still breathing and I could move my arms, so it hadn’t done a lot of damage …physically. The problem is that the pain made my body cramp up. If I tried to cast a spell like this it would be quite the burden on my concentration. Conversely, if I concentrated on the pain while using my sword or evading attacks, to the Mazoku it would seem like I was casting a spell. So this is pretty much– no, this is completely impossible. If I hadn’t gone for a body slam like that I would have been fine… this must be the pain of war. Luke and Milina came running toward me.

“Lina!” Gourry also turned and ran this way, showing his back to Faliarl. Faliarl followed him, but calculating Gourry’s speed and the distance that was already between them, it was safe.

“Are you okay?!”

I nodded at Gourry.

“It’s not serious… but it does hurt…”

At the word ‘hurt,’ the other spellcasters, Luke and Milina, guessed what had happened. Their expressions hardened. Essentially– that meant I had just become a burden. Like this, our fighting power was down to… three or less. Faliarl followed us to where we had all gathered. Surdian was also coming this way and Jade wandered in from the side…

“Ohohohoho! Well, well. You’re having trouble with these kind of enemies? Only humans could get burned like this.” What should have been an irritating voice, this time was reassuring to my ears.

* * *

“What?!” I’m not sure if that cry was from Surdian or Faliarl. If I looked up and back, I could see a shadow standing upright on the handrail of the second floor terrace. Blue clothes and white armor. Golden hair that fluttered– er, it couldn’t flutter because there was no wind. She made her appearance, along with some weird deja vu[1]. The one we had been separated from at the North Tower, Memphis!

“An Elf?! It can’t be…! You already broke through our forces?!” At Faliarl’s question– no, shocked expression, Memphis gave a calm smile.

“I’m here, which means there’s only one answer. Isn’t that right?” I see, it’s just as I thought. She and Mr. Milgazia had been fighting Mazoku somewhere. With a ‘ta-!’ Memphis jumped from the handrail, whirling through the air as if she had wings and landed on the first floor.

“Then that means… that dragon…!”

“It’s just as you say.” In response to Surdian, a voice came from around where Memphis had been. “Currently your forces have been eradicated. Now carefully tell us what on earth you Mazoku are planning.” As he spoke, Mr. Milgazia descended the stairs.

“—Kuee!” Without actually answering and making a sound as if he was being backed into a corner, Faliarl scowled at Memphis. She scowled back a little, then in a flash, I saw the area around her chest blur. That was all.

“I-Impossible! The space…!” Faliarl’s impatience was growing deeper. I don’t know what happened, but from what he said, he must have attacked her across space, and she defended against it.

“If that’s how it is–!”

Gagiiiii–!

Surdian roared and at the same time, an ear-splitting sound rose up. I saw quite the spectacle around Memphis. She had used Zanaffar to guard against an attack from the Astral Plane, and the aftershock intervened in this space.

Utilizing the circumstances, Surdian leaped for Memphis. A pincer attack from the Astral and Physical Planes! Memphis didn’t move from where she was. Being able to see his presence, Mr. Milgazia restrained Faliarl. And then–

“Ra Tilt!”

“Gaaahhh!?”

Milina called forth a pillar of blue light that ensnared Surdian. As you’d expect, a direct hit from the strongest Astral spell would

cause a Mazoku to scream like that. With that scene, she didn't miss her chance to stop the attack from the Astral Plane.

"Dis Shield!" Memphis raised her hand at Surdian. "Megiddc Arc!"

Fwoom! As she spoke those chaos words, the Mazoku's body was wrapped in crimson flame.

The flames roared with the agony of death. All that was left afterward was the trembling sound as the Mazoku and the flames disappeared. In the disturbance caused by their appearance, Memphis and Milgazia had forgotten we existed. *How many times are you gonna look down on us for being human?*

Mr. Milgazia landed down on the floor.

"What will you do?" He asked. Without looking directly at him, Faliarl responded with a stiff smile.

"*What will I do*? Don't make me laugh. You must be joking if you think I'm just going to tell you everything. There's no benefit in me telling you. After all, we're Mazoku and you're living beings. We're incompatible. Mutually exclusive. And there's only one choice I can make."

"In other words, you want to fight."

"It's just… as you say!" The Mazoku roared and kicked the ground, transformed into a single arrow, heading toward Mr. Milgazia. The flying implement was not an attack from the Astral Plane. This was a contest of ineffective tricks and the ability to discern them. Mutually enveloped in magical power, they stopped

each other, fist to fist, causing the world to shake.

"Ooooooohhhhhhhhhhh!" The two battle cries welled up, burning the air and transforming it into plasma. A competition of strength and magical power– Instantly, Faliarl's arm transformed into something grotesque.

A number of black tentacles came forward and coiled around Mr. Milgazia's right arm. A look of fear came to his face, that is, Faliarl's face. His upper body began to flail backwards–

Fwoom! Appearing from Mr. Milgazia's back was a pair of Golden wings, which slashed apart Faliarl's neck.

* * *

The defeated body turned into black ash as it fell and disappeared. And that was the end of Faliarl.

"…Elder!" Without paying attention to the Mazoku's last moments, Memphis' voice trembled with panic. Following her gaze– there was nothing below Mr. Milgazia's right shoulder. His arm was lying beside him on the floor, where Faliarl had fallen and disappeared.

…wait, what the…?!

"There's no need to be concerned." Mr. Milgazia said as if it was nothing. With his left hand, he picked up the piece that had dropped to the floor. "Now that you mention it, I don't think I ever told you Memphy. I lost my actual right arm one thousand years ago during the Kouma War. I crafted a spell to make this prosthetic. It doesn't move any differently than a real arm. Sometimes even I forget it's a

fake."

…He seriously forgets. But then the guy uses the same arm to fight Mazoku. When Faliarl seized his arm with his tentacles, he probably undid it so that the enemy would lose his balance.

"Well, as for the other one…" Taking hold of his prosthetic arm again, Mr. Milgazia walked toward him, the only one remaining, Jade. Up until now he hadn't moved at all. Because he was now the avatar for a demon, instinctively he would see Memphis and Mr. Milgazia as his own enemies.

"I see… they used a human." Mr. Milgazia said bitterly as he looked toward Jade. Somehow he realized that Jade was a human that had been used to create a demon.

"Can't… you do something for him?! Don't you have a spell or something?!" Luke cried out, but Mr. Milgazia only shook his head.

"He's.. no longer human. There's nothing that can be done about it. Even if there was a spell that could temporarily remove the demon from inside him, or return him to his human form, it's too late to return his human heart. The most we can do is…"

Luke gently pushed Mr. Milgazia aside as he headed for Jade.

"The most we can do is… perform the final rites for Sir Jade." As he said it, the background blurred into a void. Now that I think about it, from the very beginning, Luke and Milina were the ones who originally accepted his commission. With a sword hanging from one hand, he slowly walked toward Jade.

"It's awful, but…"

“It’s beyond our control.”

Milina reassured Luke.

Realizing that Memphis and Mr. Milgazia weren’t acting, Jade finally moved. And the two confronted each other with their swords. They both kicked the floor simultaneously, closing the distance between them in one go and brandishing their swords. Right before Luke’s eyes, Jade produced an orb of magic. And then–

“Ooooooohhhh!” with a scream filled with fighting spirit, Luke’s sword split though the ball of magic along with Jade’s face.

The Shadow of the One Who Sits at the Throne.

Already Gone.

There wasn't even a trace left of the one who existed in this world as Jade Codewell. The Jade that Luke defeated took the form of dirty, red, mud and disappeared in the wind. It seems those who cease to be human are not allowed to return to the soil.

…..

Luke let his shoulders drop, with a small, deep sigh.

"Memphy." Driving away the heavy air, Mr. Milgazia spoke in the same tone as always. "Lina Inverse is injured. Please heal her." At Mr. Milgazia's request, she obediently turned me over and began casting a spell.

"You too. Help her out."

Milina walked toward Luke and began casting a recovery spell with the same coldness she always showed. When he cut through that ball of magic that Jade had summoned, the aftershock must have somehow wounded him. But it didn't look like Luke himself had noticed it. The fight that had been going on until a short while ago, seemed like a lie. This quiet moment…

Thanks to Memphis' recovery spell, my back was warm and the pain was disappearing.

"Hey… Memphis…" I spoke to her while looking forward while she was still at my back.

“What?”

“I can’t really help it but your entrance… reminded me of a weird person I used to know…”

Eep!

Without even turning around, I knew Memphis was turning blue.

“H-Hey, you–! This is the thanks I get for saving you?! Is this how humans are? Can’t even give proper gratitude?!” The one who responded to that, wasn’t me, but Milina. She stared straight ahead at Memphis.

“That’s right. We never thanked you. Thank you, Memphis.”

“…ugh…” For some reason I thought I heard a groan coming from behind me.

Hm? And then Gourry curiously asked as he looked this way, “Something wrong? You’re face is all red.”

“H-How obnoxious! It’s nothing!” Memphis immediately gave a flustered response. “Anyway! I’m done healing!” She said as she slapped my back. The pain had completely disappeared.

…… wait…. Hahaa… by any chance… I turned my neck around, staring at Memphis with a smile.

“W-What is it?! What’s with those eyes?!”

“It’s nothing. Thank you for healing my injury.” I said staring into Memphis’ eyes. She averted her gaze slightly.

“I-I only did it because Mr. Milgazia asked me to!”

I grinned broadly. Now I understood. Hoho~. I see. It's just like I thought.

"Hey Memphis… by any chance… You always have this 'holier-than-thou' attitude but, could it be that you're actually really shy?"

"Wh–?!" At that she turned red up to her ears.

YESSSSSSSS! BINGOOO! Now I have something to tease h about!

"Wow, you're really red, aren't you?"

"Wh-What?! That's…!"

"Certainly. For many years, Memphy was a very timid and nervous girl." Mr. Milgazia nonchalantly slipped that cryptic comment while giving Memphis a sidelong glance.

"Wh–?! Elder, that's…!"

"It's nothing to be concerned about. Back then, even your father said that Shyness is just being embarassed by your strength."

"Ooohhhhhhhh…. So she's really a shy and naïve girl, is she? Hmmmm…"

"……!" At all of my teasing Memphis no longer had anything to say.

Without worrying about it, Mr. Milgazia continued speaking. “It wasn’t until she encountered a human sorceress who told her it was fine to act high-handed, and with that her shyness was cured.”

…….. hm? At that nonchalant phrase I knit my eyebrows.

“Yeah? So you’re saying the whole ‘the likes of humans’ thing was helpful?” At Luke’s retort, her cheeks were completely red.

“Th-That was a special case! I did that to give myself a firm policy and self-confidence. If I was truly noble, I had to say things like that!”

Somehow… those character traits… I feel like I heard them before, years ago… before I met Gourry… Thinking about it, it was nothing but horrific. My chest swelled.

“….. um…… By any chance……. that human sorceress…….there’s no way…….. wait. It’s nothing.” I had a feeling that I was about to hear a terrifying answer, so I swallowed my question. In this world, there are things that are better left unknown.

“Is something wrong?”

“No it’s really nothing! Nothing at all! Anyway, more than that…” At Milgazia’s question, I quickly changed the subject. “The four of us were thrown into a strange space, but we cut our way out, which is why we were fighting here. What happened on your end?”

“Something like that. Memphis and I were invited to a different space, where we received the Mazoku’s welcome. There were about ten humanoid Mazoku.”

Whoa, Whoa! Ten of them?! I see. So that's what…. Faliarl meant by 'our forces.'

"You really… broke through huh?"

"Yes. Memphis suddenly used Zanaffar to go into Full Armor mode and started to go on a rampage. The Mazoku were shocked when their leaders fell, and then the rest were crushed."

Whoa. That's excessively violent. No wonder the Mazoku all lost their bearings. An Elf in weird armor suddenly transforms into a white giant, which starts going berserk…. Well, at any rate, we eradicated all of the Mazoku that appeared before us.

"The problem is what to do next. We took down all of the Mazoku, but that doesn't mean it's all over."

"Hm…" Mr. Milgazia groaned. What I got from listening to Surdian and Faliarl is that they were both of the same rank. And by the way they called Sherra 'Lord' then they must be a lower level than her. And then the ones Memphis and Milgazia were fighting were probably the same level– No, the way Faliarl referred to them as 'forces' it's unlikely that they were of a high level. If all of the Mazoku hiding out in the palace are on the same level as Surdian, we'd end up seeing a lot of new faces, over here and over there, proceeding with the conspiracy. That's highly unlikely.

"This definitely isn't going to be easy, huh? It'd be great if someone came out and said 'I am the final boss' and then explained everything from here to there and let us defeat him." Milina had finished her healing spell, and Luke spoke while clutching his side after checking his health with both hands. That would be too

convenient. That said, I wouldn't want some guy to show up and say 'I'm the final boss.' To be honest… As he said, this definitely won't be easy. Before, we fought Sherra, and she was just a mid-boss but…

Sherra…. boss…… oh…. wait…… I just thought of something disturbing….

"What wrong, Lina? Your face is weird."

"My face is weird? The way you say that… No, it's just… I just had a weird thought."

"Speaking of weird, since we got here, there hasn't been a single person around. If we're gonna talk weird, then that's pretty weird. When we were walking down that hallway, there were human presences in the rooms, that's for sure, but no one ever came out."

"Those guys… did they do this just to fight with us one on one? They disguised themselves as higher-ups and irrationally ordered everyone not to leave their rooms no matter what, just so they could fight without any additional burdens?" Luke responded to Gourry.

Uh…. hm. There's no way it could be like that…

"Guys… Sorry, but could you follow me for a while…?"

Gourry only answered with "Bathroom?"

"Hell no! Do you think I'm a little kid?! –It might just be my imagination, but I can't say for sure. I had an idea about what's been going on. I just wanted to check up on it."

"What is it? Your idea?"

"……" I hesitated to answer Memphis' question. Plainly said, the basis for my idea was just a simple thought.

"Go on with your idea. Now that it's out." Milina broke the silence. So the natural course would be–

"Definitely. It's just as Milina says. I think so too. Mm-hm." Just as I expected, Luke jumped in.

"It doesn't really matter to me." And as usual, Gourry has no opinion. As for the rest…

"We certainly don't know anything, so anything would be sufficient if it would help us continue on from here." Mr. Milgazia said. Memphis had no objections.

"In that case… shall we go?" Everyone nodded in agreement and I started walking. "By the way, Mr. Milgazia," I asked as I vaguely remembered the path we were supposed to take.

"In that last battle, Surdian– the Mazoku who was fighting against Memphis, I thought he attacked her from the Astral Plane but… Anyway, you and Memphis… If we humans received the same attack from a Mazoku is there any way we could defend ourselves against it?"

"No."

Uh… The way he said it so easily and without any delay put me at a loss for words.

"For one, when facing a human in battle, a Mazoku wouldn't attack from the Astral Plane to begin with."

“Why’s that?” Luke interjected from the side.

“There is a human proverb that goes ‘even a dragon can exhaust its power when defeating a small bird.’ The same is applicable to Mazoku. From a Mazoku standpoint, when facing humans, they would rather exploit their negative emotions, such as fear, than deceive them. Besides, with the exception of a few of you, you humans don’t have enough power to protect yourself against a Mazoku. Well, as for you all, though your power exceeds normal humans, you still fall short of defeating subordinate Mazoku.

“Hey… you’re saying that like we suck.” Luke muttered in a disappointed tone, but it was the truth. Even a great sorcerer, if he’s human, has to first speak the chaos words in order to cast a spell. Without that formality, the spell can’t be invoked. However, even the lowest ranking Mazoku, Lesser demons, can produce a flare arrow just by barking. Memphis and Mr. Milgazia did something like that, and because they are Dragon and Elven, it’s possible. Mr. Milgazia continued speaking.

“Take no offense. The Mazoku realize that. For Mazoku, humans are not worthy opponents. When fighting something that they shouldn’t consider an opponent, attacking from the Astral Plane– moreover, seriously attacking, is like admitting that you don’t even have enough power to defeat a human. That realization, for a spiritual being such as Mazoku, is easily a fatal wound.”

I see… huh.

“Uh… I don’t really understand but…” As I expected, Gourry had a question. Just like always.

“Well… in other words, Mazoku are stubborn so they won’t hit you with strange attacks.”

“So that’s how it is. That’s easy to figure out from the start.”

“……” Hearing that line from Gourry, who never thinks about anything, Mr. Milgazia went silent. Uh… is he pouting…? Somewhere during all of that talking, we had proceeded up some stairs and down another vacant hallway.

……oh……. ohh…

Passing through the corridor, a small sound carried by the wind reached my ear.

“What was that? That voice?”

“A moan… or rather, a distant scream.”

Memphis and Mr. Milgazia readily concluded that it was a voice.

“A voice?” listening in on their conversation, Luke knit his brow. Back when we fought Sherra, we heard this sound in the palace. A gave a brief explanation.

“Long ago, the King at the time faced the Mazoku subjugation and the Mazoku cursed him by transforming his body into an immortal piece of meat. He’s now being imprisoned somewhere in this castle– That’s how the story goes.”

“Now that you mention it… I’ve heard that before…” Remembering that the one who told him was Jade, Luke lowered his voice toward the end.

“This isn’t what you were checking on, was it?”

“Of course not.”

At Memphis’ question I shook my head. If that was the case, there’s nothing we could do about it now.

“Then where are you heading?”

“……” I couldn’t answer her second question. Of course, there’s a reason I couldn’t.

Because I was lost.

If you really think about it, there’s no reason I would know the castle’s layout. For our current invasion, the route was different from the last time we came here. And though Former General Alce told us how to get where we were heading, we hadn’t started on the correct route. As I was walking, I tried to think of a way to say that we were lost. But suddenly, my field of vision widened. There were rows and rows of marble pillars, lining an outstretched red carpet. The audience chamber? Somehow wandering in a strange way led us to a strange place. It was as if authorized persons were supposed to be coming and going around us. At the end of the outstretched red carpet, was an empty throne.

“!!!”

Tension ran through us all. We all noticed a single silhouette standing beside the throne. The six of us automatically stopped as he stared at us quietly. He was covered in heavy silver armor with a great sword at his side. Underneath his helmet, I recognized the face. Long black hair, mid-thirties, with the majesty of a king etched into his face.

“King Wells Xeno Gyria.”

“Is this… a prank?”

Milina and Luke mumbled in a daze.

It’s like he knew we were coming. That’s what I wanted to say.

“Now what could you want? And at this hour?” King Wells’ heavy voice resounded throughout the empty space. While keeping my distance from him, I began walking down the red carpet.

“What could we want, huh? At this hour? Maybe to know why the King is armed in his own audience chamber.”

“And you came here to ask that?” I had only started walking, when he started coming toward me. Without even thinking about it, at the same time, I retreated back.

“Of course, don’t you know that I already know that? *Your Royal Highness King Wells*.” Of course I had already realized it. The armor he walked in should have been made of steel, but it didn’t clank when he walked.

“Hm.…” At that, his mouth formed a small smile.

Boom!

“…?!”

An intense impact pierced through his whole body, and I immediately held my breath.

“K–!”

“Wha–?!”

Behind me I could hear the shocked voices of Memphis and Mr. Milgazia. Just now, that wasn't an impact. Only until now he had been hiding it. He had stopped concealing his presence. That's all it was. It's just that pressure is caused by the soul and the flesh resonating.

"You have excellent perception. When– Why did you think that?"

"I thought about it only a little while ago." Even though we were just chatting, the pressure was suffocating. "I realized your motive, was something I had heard." I wouldn't lose like that. I stood with my legs apart and puffed out my chest. "When Mazoku contract with each other, they only serve those more powerful than them. If that's the case…" I looked directly at him. "The one General Sherra sacrificed herself for… was you. Dynast Grausherra."

* * *

Silence controlled the audience chamber. A long– a brief silence.

That's how it was. The king wasn't being controlled or seduced by Sherra. *She came here because the king had changed.* That's what we all had thought. So basically, we were wrong, but our reasoning was correct.

Mazoku are spiritual beings. If they have enough power, they can take the same form as humans, but they probably can't copy someone's appearance exactly. The king changed. From a real one, to an impostor. The switch probably happened when Sherra came to the palace. After that, with Sherra continuously at his side, his words and actions changed. So from afar, it would seem like the

change was her fault. But Sherra wasn't just a performer in his scheme. She wasn't there just to serve as camouflage. Standing beside her, she was concealing a greater darkness. Just as we were about to defeat Sherra, she smiled. That smile wasn't because she carried out her duty as camouflage.

"Hahahahahahaha!" He tore through the silence with a loud laugh. "You have quite the imagination!" This is the conclusion you came to only going off of that?"

"That isn't the only reason. Right now, the gates are closed and the castle is refusing to interfere with what's going on in the city. The soldiers were given ridiculous orders to not leave the building– Where did those orders come from? The King of this Kingdom. With all of your high officials being Mazoku, I could see a gutless King obediently listening to them, but more then that, for all these absolute orders from the King, the reasoning behind them is always weak. That said– what gave it away in the end? It was the meaning of those orders."

"Meaning? That's ridiculous. That made you think there was some kind of plot? You're thinking too much. What if we were just having a meal?"

"A meal?" Milina asked.

"Yes. Our provisions come from negative emotions. Anxiety and unhappiness. Dread and irritation. Letting those feelings spread through the city isn't a bad method, don't you think?"

"So you let demons run wild through the city so you could have a meal?" Luke spat.

“The other reason… is that I desire battle.” At that he started walking. Slowly. Right toward us.

“He’s… strong, an opponent not of this dimension.” Beside me, Mr. Milgazia spoke in a hoarse voice.

“…I know that.”

“And you thought we had a chance?! Human girl?!”

“I didn’t… but…”

“Then why?! When you realized it, why didn’t you suggest we withdraw?!”

“You think I would have run away?”

“….”

Mr. Milgazia went silent. His mind was rattled. This was the Golden Dragon Elder who survived the Kouma War.

“One more thing. What did you do with the real King Wells?!” I yelled at the figure coming toward me. I know. Even on my own. This was all just to heat up our fears.

“No one will care if the number of screaming chunks of meat in the castle increases from one to two.” That’s the answer he gave me.

That means just like the old king, he’s been transformed into an immortal chunk of meat, and is being imprisoned in the same place. As he walked toward us, the King’s face changed, little by little. From the back of his head stretched to objects resembling horns. His cheeks and eyebrows hardened and discolored, making a cover for his eyes. The cold pressure in my chest was either because I knew I

was facing Dynast, or because I feared for the souls of all living things.

"…We won't lose!" Personally, I yelled this to cheer up the others. "And there's a reason we can't lose! Because Grau*sherra*, you're such a simple guy that you would name your subordinate *Sherra*!"

"Her name? Now that you mention it, a while back I remember she asked me something about that. As he walked, his helmet transformed, but his walk didn't change. "Greater Beast gave her priest half of her own name. But to be honest, I can't really understand that. Why do you need to be so particular about the name of a tool?"

...!

"Are you… mocking her?"

"I told you. For a Mazoku who feeds on negative emotions, she was an excellent second party."

This… bastard! Previously when we encountered Sherra in the castle, it was strange, but it seemed like she had been driven into a corner. And then he would go proclaiming that the one who served him was just a tool. He didn't pity Sherra in the least. We can't just leave him at large!

"We'll defeat you." I said looking straight at him. "Surely, your power may be overwhelming, But… We'll show you that we can defeat you!"

"Pffthahahahaha! Nice battle cry! Very interesting!" Dynast

laughed out loud again. At my words he stopped walking and held out his sword. “Very well then! I accept your challenge, by the name of Dynast Grausherra! Come now, you who live.”

And that was the signal bell for the fight to begin.

* * *

“Fel Za Rhed!” The instant Grausherra finished talking, Luke and Milina released the spells they had been casting in unison. The two lengths of light hit Dynast’s body directly–

“If that’s your signal for the battle to begin, then it lacks splendor.” That was Grausherra’s response.

“Wh–?!” Just as expected, the two of them cried out in shock. And then a light tore through the empty air. Memphis’ Zanaffar armor had used its laser breath.

“Did you think a frail light like that…” Dynast held out his left hand. A small black orb appeared in his palm and swallowed the torrent of light. “…could smash through the darkness I hold?!” Dynast didn’t move a step.

“Ooooohhhhhh!” Gourry ran forward following the traces left by Memphis’ light.

Clang!

With a cry of fighting spirit, he drew his sword in succession and went for a slash attack. Dynast caught it with his sword and repelled the attack.

“Oh? You’re very skilled! Interesting! I’ll follow your lead!” The

two swords flashing, increasing in speed with each attack, filled the empty hall with a clear sound.

"Vabrazard Flare!" Mr. Milgazia cut in from the side with an attack spell. However–

Fwah! With a wave of Grausherra's left hand, the light changed its trajectory and crashed into the ceiling. There, part of the ceiling evaporated, leaving an open hole, and the spell flying off somewhere.

"How tactless!" Dynast roared and swung his left arm.

BOOM!

"…!"

A shockwave came forward and blew into Mr. Milgazia without even allowing him to cry out. His body collided with a marble pillar then tumbled to the floor.

"Elder!" Memphis' scream of anguish rang out.

"I'm playing with the human right now! Don't get in my way, stupid dragon!" He said as he cast him aside, turning his attention back to Gourry. Of course, when he moved his left arm at Mr. Milgazia, he opened himself up to Gourry's return slash. He's playing with us. Dynast said it himself. But–

"Don't underestimate me!" In an instant, Gourry's sword slipped through the swing of Grausherra's blade, and with a straight stab, caught him in the shoulder.

"Oh… Impressive." A faint smile came to Dynast's face as he

said it.

"Wha–?!" He drew his body back, with an astonished look on his face. "It didn't affect him…?!"

Dynast answered him, "No, it affected me. About as much as a drop of water affects a stone. But don't be discouraged, Swordsman. Your skill is excellent. However that sword… won't work."

"Ra Tilt!"

If she uses that spell– From Milina's spell, a blue pillar of light wrapped around Dynast's body. The strongest attack spell in Shamanist Magic! But–

With one swing of his sword, Grausherra tore the pillar of light apart.

"A ghost?!" For once, Milina's voice sounded impatient.

"Wrong! You're just too fragile! After all, your life is bound to that vess– Huh?!"

Clang!

In the middle of what he was saying, Gourry slashed at him, and Dynast caught it.

"Are you supposed to be a distraction?!" There was ridicule mixed into his voice. But he was wrong. The Gourry I know is dumber than that.

"Don't make light of me! Who are you calling a distraction?!" The speed of Gourry's sword increased. The tip of his blade grazed Dynast's armor over and over again. "Let me show you how a drop

of water can destroy a stone!”

See? Dumb.

“Is this… you true character?!” As Gourry handled his sword, Grausherra’s words began to sound a bit surprised.

Yes. What we need right now, is for that idiot to get serious. If you fight with the idea that you’re going to lose, your chance of winning becomes zero. So even if your chance of success is low, fight like you’re going to win! I had said that once before, but the fact of the matter is, that’s how I am. Remember that, Gourry.

“Zelas Brid!” The band of light I cast followed after Dynast.

His sword met the band. As he cut through it, Gourry struck his armor again.

“Everyone! Now that it’s come to this, we must attack seriously and desperately!” At my words, Luke went running toward Dynast, Milina began chanting her next spell, and somehow, Mr. Milgazia was up and going around for an attack. So then–

“Memphis?” She was standing still, a little ways behind me, shivering. “Get a hold of yourself!”

“…It’s …impossible.” She drew near me, her voice weakening.

“What are you saying?! What happened to all the energy you usually have?!”

“It’s impossible!” She shook her head with her voice wavering. “For you… For humans… You only say things like that because you can’t see *that* from the the Astral Plane! I used that spell to prove

it… I shut off Zanaffar from the Astral Plane… I saw it! There was Dynast's real body… A wide… extravagantly large darkness…! The one we see in front of us, is just an avatar for that whole! Even if we could hurt him a bit, if his real body did the slightest thing, sending just a little bit of power from there, would be the end for us. It's impossible. Defeating something like that… is impossible." With that she shook her head a little. "….."

“Is that the best she could do? That sorceress you met.”

“Huh?” not understanding what I meant at the moment, she knit her eyebrows a little

“The sorceress you met who changed you– Mr. Milgazia mentioned it. I don’t know how you were in the past, but right now, you’re reverting to how you were before you met her. Am I wrong? *Memphy*?”

“…..”

“In the end, she could only change you on the surface. Only to that degree. That’s what I say.” By that same logic, even if Memphis blamed herself, if she was frightened now, she’d still nod and agree and this would be over. But I made sure to mention this *sorceress* she owes a debt of gratitude. After that…

“After that, it’s your problem. If you’re scared and you want to get rid of those negative emotions, the Mazoku will be happy to kill you. You’re only chance is to fight. Do what you like. The choice is yours, Memphy.” I said over my shoulder as I started toward Dynast again, chanting a spell in my mouth.

“It’s Memphis, not Memphy.” I heard her say from my back.

That’s just fine.

* * *

“Ruby Eye Blade!” Luke released his spell then circled around to join Gourry for a pincer attack. By pulling it from it’s scabbard and holding to the side with both hands, he produced a sword of Red Magical power. It was a magic sword that draws its power from

this world's Dark Lord, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu..

"K–!" As if he couldn't afford to be hit by it, Grausherra pulled back his sword from the exchange with Gourry, and creating a blade of blue magical power, blocked Luke's attack.

In that interval, Gourry's sword struck Dynast's armor.

"Eeh!" Dynast flung his left arm, and Gourry blocked it with the handle of his sword. He stopped it, but in doing so, he was blown away. At the moment of impact, Dynast had produced a shockwave. Either he lost in brute strength or he couldn't touch him altogether. Gourry was separated from the space, and in a flash, Mr. Milgazia jumped in to cover for him. Like this, he drove his fist toward Dynast.

Boom!

A light flashed the moment it hit. Probably at the same time it hit, he struck him with his own magic.

"Not yet!" Grausherra roared as he swung his left hand, sending Mr. Milgazia scuttling across the floor.

"Ra Tilt!" Milina used a second Spirit-tearing attack, wrapping around Grausherra.

"That won't work!" With Dynast's war cry, the pillar of light crumbled. From the side Gourry had regained his posture and went in for a slash. Grausherra turned to look toward him. Then suddenly glanced toward me. Waving his left arm.

There was a small sound in the air. If you followed his gaze, Memphis was there with her oddly-shaped white sword in one hand.

I see. I sensed that Memphis had released a slash that passed through the space, but it was countered in another space. But in any case it seemed like a continuous attack.

“Zelas Brid!” The band of light I released was heading straight for Dynast.

“Don’t you understand that that won’t work?!” With his left hand raised, he assaulted my band of light.

“Zelas Phalanx!” Mr. Milgazia barked from the background. He can’t dodge this joint attack. But just then, as you’d expect, having achieved his use for magic power, the light disappeared from Luke’s hands.

“Ooooooooohhhh!” Dynast roared. By producing a magic shield in front of his left hand against my spell, he was free to swing his sword, smashing into the spell Mr. Milgazia released. Just then, something white rushed past my side.

–Memphis! Dynast turned his attention toward her.

“Break! Attack!” Along with Memphis’ voice, a glittering whiteness jumped up, spewing towards Dynast.

“I said it was usele–”

The light that had been called forth sucked up the black ball. It disappeared partway through Dynast’s sentence. He then noticed the armor whirling through the air.

“…?!”

At that moment, Memphis disabled the Zanaffar and went

tumbling to Dynast's feet.

"Rune Streid!"

With a direct hit from her lance of light, Dynast's body quivered a little.

BOOM!

"–gh!"

With one kick, Grausherra sent her flying. She tumbled across the floor until she eventually slid to a stop near me.

"Memphy!" Mr. Milgazia cried out, but under the pressure of Dynast's gaze, he didn't move from where he was. I ran over to her in a panic. But before I could get to her, the white armor returned of its own accord, coiling around her …this is…

"Hm. Just as you'd epect, Elves bodies are so brittle." Grausherra's words didn't have any sort of emotion attached to them. Memphis' attack had practically no effect.

"You're joking… or… are you serious….?"

"Did you think I would only use joke-level power?" Grausherra said to Luke.

"–Memphis!" When I called to her, she slightly opened her eyes, and somehow managed to get up.

"Gehh…cough! cough cough!" Her body folded and went into a coughing fit– spitting up traces of blood.

"–gh!" I rushed to regulate her casting of a recovery spell by

hand, as she put her own hand to her stomach and roughly cast the spell. I definitely see it now. Before I could use a recovery spell, it would be nice if she could use Zanaffar to amplify the effect of the spell. But until she recovered, what should we do about Dynast…?

"Is that a recovery spell? Just out of curiosity." While crossing swords with Gourry, Grausherra spoke in a calm voice. "It would be better if you just entrusted that body to the arms of death. Or do you choose to face pain again?" He's completely… toying with us. Certainly if that's all that's on his mind, there's a chance we could beat him in no time. Where that's concerned… all we can do challenge him in one go before he starts worrying. But… Memphis hasn't finished recovering. Somehow, we'll have to get half of her body to that place…

"That was excessive."

"Do you think we could win… without being excessive?" She answered me with a smile.

"…seriously… Anyway, that Zanaffar seems like it attacks and reverts of its own accord…"

"Oh, It's because this is my own personal Zanaffar. It doesn't listen to anyone but me, and to some degree, it acts on its own…"

…hm…

"If that's so… Is it all right if I make a little bit of an *excessive* request?"

* * *

"Dynast Grausherra!" I raised my voice. Still continuing his fight

with Gourry, Dynast scowled at me. “One moment… For just one moment, all of us are going to hit you with all of the power that we have!”

“I’d like to see that! Do as you please!” Dynast said. His voice was calm, without the slightest tremor. If that’s how it is– Let’s go!

Lord of Darkness of the four worlds,
In accordance with the fragment of fate that binds us
Grant me all of the power that you possess.

Using the four talismans I wore on my body, along with the accompanying chaos words, a radiance was released and my magical power was temporarily greatly increased. Then, using my averted glance as a signal, Memphis went running toward Dynast. I started running a bit later, chanting a spell in my mouth. Memphis pursued Dynast–

“Staggering your timing for a consecutive attack? Useless!” As Grausherra roared, A white figure whirled out in front of his eyes.

“Don’t mock me! Do you think you can use the same attack on Dynast twice?!” Repelling Gourry’s sword, Zanaffar disregarded anything underfoot. Dancing into the air and knocking into him.

What the hell?! The one you should be fighting is over there! And you can’t just use the same attack on Dyanst twice!

Memphis disabled Zanaffar. As she landed on the ground she took a great jump back. Dynast’s sword only grazed the surface of the floor.

And then–! The transformed Zanaffar coiled itself around

Dynast's entire body.

"Wh–?!" For the first time. Grausherra cried out in honest astonishment. He probably couldn't comprehend what we were doing.

What we're doing– is this.

"Shield!" Instantly, in accordance with Memphis' command, she invoked Zanaffar's first function. That is, completely cutting off the wearer from his Astral body. That's right! Using the Zanaffar on Grausherra's embodiment here, we could separate him from his real body on the Astral Plane.

"This is…!" As you'd expect, Dynast was shocked.

"Ruby Eye Blade!" Luke invoked his magic sword for the second time that day, slashing at Dynast.

"I won't allow it!" With Magic power wrapped around his longsword, Dynast caught the blow. His movement had definitely become slower than before. That kind of opposition–

"Ohhhhh!" Gourry followed with an attack. But Dynast wasn't paying any attention to it. If his power was halved– or less than that, then he couldn't help but get damaged by Gourry's strike. But at that instant, Dynast caught Gourry's sword.

"OOOOHHHHHHH!" Mr. Milgazia raised a dragon shout. Acting in accordance, a red pattern glowed on the blade of Gourry's sword. This is the pattern Mr. Milgazia drew… I get it! This pattern is drawn in Dragon's blood, probably Mr. Milgazia's own! The pattern drawn on the sword, resonated with Mr. Milgazia's power,

and pierced through Dynast's body!

"Gaah!?" Dynast let out a little cry of pain. That definitely had some effect on him! Grausherra didn't waver. With his left hand he grabbed hold of the blade of the sword. The steel made a small screaming sound.

"Shrewd bastard!!" With a roar, Dynast easily broke the blade in his hand. And then. Within the broken blade. Was a blade one size smaller.

"Wh–?!"

Shock came to all of our faces.

"The Blast Sword?!" With Mr. Milgazia's voice, the orchid colored blade pierced deeply into Dynast Grausherra's flank.

"GOOOOOooooOOOHHH!" Grausherra's scream rang out, th sword's judgement causing him to lapse into chaos. Slipping though that gap in time– Luke's sword mowed into his body.

"Guuuuooooooohhhhhh!!!" His scream was no longer even human. Dynast's gaze stopped as he stared directly forward. That's right. He was staring at me coming towards him.

Lord of the dreams which terrify,
Free yourself from the heaven's bonds
Sword of the cold, black void.
Become one with my power, one with my body,
And let us walk the path of destruction together,
Power to smash even the souls of the gods–

Dynast should know it. Calling on the power of the Lord of

Nightmares, a blade of nothingness. Grausherra waved his sword. From the blade he produced a magic power shockwave. He probably intended to keep me from coming closer. But from his sword only came the sound of slicing through wind.

When the wearer is Astral shielded by Zanaffar, as compensation, they completely lose the ability to use any magical attacks with the exception of joining and unfastening. At that point it would probably invoke its own power– unless, by Memphis' command it became undone. Because she had been listening to me, Milina wasn't moving. But Dynast didn't know that. Having received damage, Grausherra swung his great sword, creating an opening. Without running away from that, I dove in.

"Ragna Blade!

There was no sound. The blade of darkness that came forth divided Dynast Grausherra down the middle.

* * *

clunk.

A light, parched sound rose up as the white armor fell to the floor. The one who had been wearing it until now– Dynast Grausherra, had been extinguished because of it.

"We… did it?"

"The one that was here anyway." I said in response to Gourry's question, as I sunk to the cold floor. "The guy's main body on the Astral Plane… and then the one that appeared here. An edge piece, so to say, had been isolated by Zanaffar… Then we somehow

defeated that edge piece."

"…Hey! Just a second! So you're saying the main body is safe?!" Exhausted of his power, Luke also dropped to the floor, yelling at me for what I said.

"…That's right…"

"That's right? So… then… That guy might come back?!"

"Maybe. It's plausible… But only if he intended to expose his weakened form to human eyes."

"Which probably won't be the case." Mr. Milgazia continued my thought.

"That's right. So. We're done here."

I shot a glance at Memphis who stood near me. "Thank you for hearing out my excessive request. I appreciate the effort, Memphis."

"…Memphy is just fine." She said with a small smile."

* * *

There was a fork in the road ahead.

The rising sun had illuminated Gyria City's main street. You could see street vendors opening up shop and people coming and going. Having solved the castle closure, demons had stopped appearing in the city at night. The city of Gyria was gradually reverting to its former liveliness. This was a few days after the fight to the death with Dynast. After we had finished dealing with various things, we were finally permitted to leave the city this morning.

“This city’s pretty intense, huh?”

“…well, just like before there are people like Maius here… No, it’s become an even better place. Surely.” I irresponsibly answered Gourry, who had a distant look in his eyes.

In the end… After dealing with most things, former General Alce heard about the incident from us, and using his influence, somehow put everything in order. –And even though I make light of it, we were probably close to death there.

Even so, the king, two high officials, and then countless others disappeared from the castle over night. There’s no way there wouldn’t be an uproar about that. We don’t know if it was through conversations around the castle, or if former general Alce had somehow explained to everyone, but at any rate, a few days after the incident, an ‘official announcement’ of the King’s death ‘by illness’ poured out, and the situation was resolved.

That’s what I was hoping. The truth is, we couldn’t tell former general Alce that the king had been switched with a Mazoku. And if we wanted to persuade everyone, we couldn’t choose the quickest way. That would be– by showing them. Somewhere in the castle locked in a room, there were two chunks of meat. Of course, it could have been our imagination all along. So during that time the six of us were being ‘protected’ by staying at former general Alce’s estate….Well, that part was emotionally rigid, but there’s no way we could stay in Maius’ tiny room.

And this way we could still save on hotel charges and meals. When Maius heard about Jade, he was really depressed. We ended

this all be bidding Maius farewell. For a while he thought he'd return to his hometown, but he said he thinks he's going to hold on to this city. He didn't know what he could do by himself, but it'd be nice if he could help this city even just a little bit. A shy smile came to his face when he said– no, he tried as hard as he could to stray from saying embarrassing lines like that to me, Luke, and Memphy.

"Well then, this must be farewell" Mr. Milgazia said. Gourry turned to him and Memphy standing beside him.

"So are you two scurrying back to the mountains?"

"Could you not say 'scurrying back to the mountains?"

"The way you say it makes it sound like we're animals."

"Aaaahh, sorry, sorry."

The two of them drew closer and Gourry retracted his mistake.

"Well… Dragon's peak is a mountain… and Mempy's village is in the mountains… But for now we plan on traveling a bit more. In the end, we never found out what Dynast was plotting, which means his scheme could be revived.

Right. It's just as he said. For now we've won the fight against Grausherra, but his whole body wasn't destroyed. So in the end we really don't know what he was planning. We couldn't say the issue with the demon hordes was settled until we saw the state of things around here. In any case, everything was far from resolved. Even if we wanted to protect the silence, we can't guarantee that Greater Beast Zelas Metallium and Deep Sea Dolphin won't make a move But for now…

“Oh, right.” Mr. Milgazia, seeming to have just remembered something, pulled a small leather pouch from his breast pocket and handed it to the four of us. “I regret that in the end we couldn’t provide you with any weapons. But as appreciation for your help, I think this will work as compensation. Gourry peeked into the bag.

“…rocks?”

“It’s orihalcon. Orihalcon.”

“Waah! Sorry! Sorry! I really didn’t know!” Once again Milgazia drew close to Gourry and once again he gave a panicked–

…..

Wait, Orihalcon?!

“Ehhhhhhhh?!” Luke, Milina, and I raised our voices then checked inside the bag.

Whoa… it really is…

The bag wasn’t big but it was packed full of Orihalcon pebbles. This amount was probably worth around a hundred gold coins.

“Hey Gourry, if you give me that bag, I’ll buy all of your meals for the next ten days <3”

“Wow! Really, Lina?!”

“Hey look, stop acting like you’re gonna swindle him.”

“That’s not acting. She’s legitimately swindling him.” Luke and Milina reacteed to our negotiations.

“But is this really okay?” Milina asked. Mr. Milgazia gave a

small nod.

"It's mined at Dragon's Peak. Since none of it is part of our capital, you can take it without any remorse."

Whaaaaat?! There's a plce like that at Dragon's Peak?! It would've been nice to know that last time we were at there so I could have been looking for some! Er, then again last time really wouldn't have been a good time for that.

Oh well. This is one relief. Actually all of this wandering around really was a lot of busy work. From the beginning I thought that the weapons we would have received from Mr. Milgazia would have been enough, but then this little encounter happened before we could get to the Elf village. Jade was supposed to be preparing the commission fee …and then he…

Having said that, we couldn't demand a commission from Maius who didn't have a very high income. But now that we know the true identity of Gourry's sword, we can harvest it.

The Legendary Blade: The Blast Sword.

We didn't immediately know the reason why it was covered with another blade. As you'd expect of a legendary sword, the blade's sharpness was beyond first class– it was ridiculous. If it fell point down it could cut through stone pavement. It could cut a rock and the two halves would collapse to the side. If you tried to store it in a sheath, it would snap in, then split it in half. No, if the sheath was made of leather or wood it would split without warning. We can't carry around something this dangerous… Even if we could contain it, after a few days of hard travel, if you tripped and fell, it would cut

though the sheath and anything that touched the blade. It would automatically become the kind of romantic sword you use to kill random passerby just to test its skill. You just couldn't walk around with it.

This way, by making sharpness the priority, the sword of legend was made into a really stupid item. In order to use it, someone probably covered the blade with a hard steel to curb its sharpness. There's no reason for it… Absolutely no reason… This time, Mr. Milgazia finally drew a crest on it to *dull* the blade, so we could go on without further problems. Well, this way, Gourry didn't even need to get fired up to cut through rock. Anyway, aside from that, we now had some revenue and I was happy.

"You really saved us this time, humans. If you ever need anything, just ask."

"Sure. And, I get the feeling you wouldn't want there to be a situation where you would need our powers, but…"

"Just as you say." Mr. Milgazia said with a smile. "Well then, we'll be going now. You've been a great help."

We stared at their backs silently.

"Well, stay healthy everyone." with only those words and a wink, Memphy continued on.

"See you later… sometime… somewhere…" I sent my voice to their backs. Finally. The Golden Dragon elder and the Elf girl in white armor got further and further away from us, and disappeared.

"So, what about you guys?" I said to Luke over my shoulder. He

puffed out his chest

“We’ve decided. We are treasure hunters. From this road onward, we’ll go from travel to travel–”

“You weren’t going to say ‘we’ll go from travel to travel alone as a loving couple’ were you?”

“……”

Milina retorted without letting a moment pass. And just like she had hit a bulls-eye, Luke was petrified. Hmm… The road is long, but hang in there, Luke.

“Well then–”

“See ya.”

Gourry and I, and Luke and Milina headed in our separate directions.

“Now that you mention it…” Gourry said as if he had just recalled something, after we had been walking a ways down the road. “What do we do from here? You said we were looking for a sword to replace the sword of light… And we found one so…”

“…yeah…” I said in a small voice. Yeah, now that you mention it, I had a feeling he’d say that…

“Well, it’s fine.” Gourry said putting his left hand on my head.

“Huh…? What does ‘fine’ mean?”

“I don’t need a new reason to travel with you. Isn’t it fine to just go somewhere on a whim?”

“I guess so…”

For some strange reason I felt really relieved to have Gourry patting my head.

Afterword

K: It's almost the season for delicious hot pot! And with various revisions, we bring you this edition of 'The Path to the Demons Fall!'

L: Tell them how you beat the hell out of Middle-management.

K: Don't talk about Middle management. I feel sorry for him. It gets hard during production because of the conflicting demands. But I'm going to make a confession here. I think there are some who realized it, but actually, in the old edition of this volume, I told a complete lie in the afterword.

L: Huh. What do you mean by that?

K: I generally don't say things like this. I had no idea how the original version of the Path to the Demon's Fall would be read. During a meeting with someone in charge, we were worrying about the title, but both our brains lost interest in it and we decided 'well it's fine how it is' and the title didn't have to coincide with the content.

L: You would write something like that.

K: Actually, between this version and the previous one, it changed to the proper path. The next volume was the deciding factor.

L: So you wrote that, then told an uninteresting lie.

K: Ch.

L: Stop 'ch'ing. It's gross. But if you were so deceptive in the last volume's afterword, is it okay to expose that here?

K: When writing the previous edition, there was still a lot of time before the final volume came out. To prevent spoilers, I changed the way it was written, in relation to this time, when a lot of

people already know and the final volume is being sold at the same time. Well it's fine now.

L: So you told a lie to prevent spoilers. That can't really be helped… Ah! Does that mean the afterwords until now have been a spin off about me? And you actually lied to keep this project from being leaked?!

K: Well, that's not far from the truth…

L: I see. So that's how it is. You can't talk about it here. Yep Yep.

K: No, um.…?

L: I know I know. With that– Soon we'll let you all know a surpriiiiiiiise!

K: We will not!

L: Well everyone, Until next afterword~

K: Would you listen to me for once?!

Notes

[1]

Words printed on the image are different from the text. last sentence reads: “It feels like I’ve seen that entrance pose somewhere before!”